

EXEGETICAL
and HOMILY NOTES
FOR LENT

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The Scripture readings for the Lenten season, daily and Sunday, provide much food for thought and reflection. The notes in this booklet were prepared and used for daily homilies to Religious Sisters over a three year period. I purposely refrain from publishing the completed homilies. Each preacher will have insights of his own.


In the case of some of the Sundays, I have included more extensive notes on several occasions. The thoughts and conclusions thus presented are not all original. It is impossible for me to acknowledge the sources because I did not accurately note them. For that I apologize.

The exegetical notes are drawn from numerous commentaries and biblical dictionaries, most notably, *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*.

Charles E. Yost, S.C.J.

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This booklet is gratefully and lovingly
dedicated to
THE POOR HANDMAIDS OF JESUS CHRIST
who have shared my priesthood and ministry
for the past six and a half years.



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ASH WEDNESDAY

1st Reading: Joel 2: 12-18

The plague of locusts from which the people are suffering, is seen by the prophet Joel as a warning. He calls on the people to truly repent, not just outwardly, but it must be a sincere contrition, a real change of heart.

God will then forgive them, and they will again be a prosperous people, and they will have something to sacrifice to him.

All the people must take part in a public act of penance and prayer, and the motive presented to God for saving the people is possible scandal—if he doesn't save them, the other peoples will doubt His power and ridicule God's people, and taunt them about the powerlessness of their God. So God hears them.

The responsorial psalm is a prayer for forgiveness.

2nd reading: 2 Corinthians 5: 20-6:2

Paul sums up here the office of an apostle—he is a legate of Christ and an instrument of God. As legate of Christ, Paul exhorts the Corinthians to reconcile themselves with God. Paul has in mind final reconciliation — they were first reconciled in Baptism; if they have strayed from Him, now is the time to return, so that Christ's redemptive work is not in vain for them.

Paul is simply telling them to make use of the present opportunities.

Gospel: Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-18

In the previous chapter (from sermon on the mount) Matthew presents Christ as the new Moses teaching what is required to enter the kingdom of God. He explains the nature of good works.

Christ doesn't condemn doing good in public, unless it is done just to be seen by others and win their approval and recognition. Three examples are given: prayer, almsgiving and fasting. We are admonished not to advertise the fact that we may do these in order to win praise from others. It suffices that God knows what we do, and that we do it for His glory. Then it is profitable for our own salvation.

By means of the ceremony of the blessing and imposition of ashes, the Church calls us to penance. The ashes remind us of our weakness as human beings, and that all of us need repentance. They symbolize, too, the inevitability of death, when we must give an accounting to God.

Since we don't know when this will come — there is a sense of urgency. The first two readings depict that urgency. So Lent is the acceptable time of salvation.

There is no intent to set a gloomy tone. Like Paul to the Corinthians this is just a reminder to use all the opportunities we have to attain salvation.

THURSDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

1st reading: Deuteronomy 30: 15-20

The passage which makes up today's first reading forms part of the final appeal to the people to keep the law which Moses had just given them from God. The people are confronted with the necessity of committing themselves to the covenant offered by God.

The choice given them is quite simple: life or death — blessings or curses. If they love God and are loyal to him, and conform their lives to His will, they will receive life and many blessings. But if they are disloyal and turn to other gods, they will not receive and should not expect God's blessings.

The responsorial psalm tells of the rewards of the man who serves God.

Gospel: Luke 9:22-25

Today's gospel passage has Christ defining for his disciples his messiahship—what it involves—he must suffer and die and then rise. This he presents as the divine plan. Jesus then draws out the consequences of discipleship in the light of his own mission. To “take up the cross” was originally meant by Jesus to be taken literally—those who follow him must be ready to go as far as martyrdom for His sake.

St. Luke, by adding the word “daily” shows an early understanding of Christian asceticism. Luke has adapted the saying to show that following Christ must be a continual denial of one's self-centered life for the sake of the Gospel. This is our conformation to the covenant of the new law, which has even added dimension for us religious who by vow pledge ourselves to an intense following of Christ.

So Moses in the first lesson tells the people that if they are faithful and loyal to God they will receive life and many blessings. Christ in the Gospel is more explicit—he warns that fidelity and loyalty as his disciples means taking up the cross of daily suffering—living with our human weaknesses. The promise in both instances, in the Old Testament and in the New Covenant, is life—life with God.

FRIDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

1st reading: Isaias 58: 1-9a

After returning from a long exile, the people began to grumble against God; they complained that they kept the laws about worship, especially they observed the law of fasting, but they were not receiving what was due them from God. And God ordered Isaias to tell them their wickedness.

Their fasting was just an external observance with the putting on of ashes and sackcloth. They didn't make the fast days a time of prayer and reflection as they should have. They did business as usual; and there was even quarrelling and some violence.

The fasting that pleases God, Isaias told them, is not the external show they put on, but the self denial involved in helping those less fortunate than they—the hungry, the oppressed, the homeless.

The external practice of religion must be a sign of true interior disposition. When this is so God will hear them.

The responsorial psalm is again an act of sorrow and a plea for forgiveness.

Gospel: Matthew 9: 14-15

The gospels point out on a few occasions that Christ's disciples didn't observe some of the Jewish fasts, and the Pharisees noticed and objected. And Christ answered them — the fast of the Old Testament was to prepare for the coming of the messianic age. This age is here, so rejoice instead of fasting. The Pharisees, of course, didn't believe that. The imagery of the marriage feast to describe the messianic age is common in the Scriptures — the feast is a time of rejoicing; so should Christ's presence cause rejoicing.

Of course Christ's disciples will fast—after his death. Then fasting will be proper to a christian — there will be a time of waiting again — for the individual's encounter with Christ. The christian will have motivation for fasting.

Today we no longer observe externally a law of fasting for the whole period of Lent. Not that penance and self-denial, or less self-denial, is asked of us. Actually more is asked, because we are told to take the initiative and find ways of being less selfish, and ways of serving others — being kind in the meaning of the Gospel — by showing a sympathetic understanding, and really letting people know we care about them and their problems — by being amiable — forgiving readily those who may have hurt us; excuse them; and by having compassion on the suffering and so on.

There is a lot of self-denial built into our daily lives, and acceptance of daily responsibility in a spirit of true christian joy can be truly penitential. This can be the “fasting” which Christ says his followers will do.

SATURDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

Isaias 58: 9b-14

After explaining yesterday that the external act of fasting isn't what pleases God, but the interior virtue that motivates it and accompanies it, the prophet continues in today's reading to tell the people what really pleases God—helping one's fellow man. This virtue God will bless with happiness, his guidance, and a spiritual strength.

Isaias was speaking to a people recently returned from exile, and who were anxious that the city and the temple be restored. He assures them that this will follow upon their spiritual renewal.

There is a lesson here for us — our spiritual life will determine our happiness in serving God and others. And our spiritual strength will enable us to persevere in the face of difficulty.

Secondly, the prophet points out that observance of the Sabbath will call down additional blessings of peace and joy on the people.

In Brief, fidelity to God will bring the people spiritual *and* material blessings.

A prayer for fidelity is our psalm response.

Today's gospel continues to explain reasons for, or the purpose of, self-denial. Considering the size of the banquet Levi was able to give, he must have been a man of considerable wealth. Yet at the call of Christ, he left everything behind and followed Him.

I would like to refer to Luke's phrasing in the original Greek text,—the verb he uses to indicate a following, is one that indicates this was a continuing action and not just a one time act.

Again, I think there is a lesson for us here. Following Christ in the special and intense way or manner that our religious dedication asks, demands a constant or continual willingness to give generously of ourselves in our service of God and of one another.

Not the same amount of self-denial is asked of everyone, and God has a great and loving respect for the freedom that he gave us. But by vocation we proclaim a constant readiness to go out of our way should the good of God's people require it. And that good of the people must begin with the good of our immediate religious family — the local community to which we belong and to which we must first of all give our loving support; then to the Congregation, to our friends and to the people we serve in our efforts in schools, hospitals, orphanages or whatever type of service is asked of us.

Use these days of prayer and reflection to renew and strengthen yourselves for what God has in mind for you. God will as he promised thru his prophet Isaias in the first lesson, bless you with happiness, his guidance, and spiritual strength, with his peace and his joy.

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT - Cycle A

1st reading: Genesis 2: 7-9, 3: 1-7

With our first reading from the Book of Genesis, we begin the account of salvation history. The author of the book presents a popular, vivid story—his picture of God is in terms that are familiar to man.

The creation of man as described here, distinguishes him from all other creatures. Man has a special kind of existence, a unique characteristic that comes from God Himself: the Breath of life.

The Garden of Eden in which man finds himself contains symbols of life and death, good and evil. The serpent, also a creature, represents a power hostile to man. And by surrendering to the enticements offered by the serpent, man creates human evil, and realizes what he has done.

The responsorial psalm is a confession of guilt, and a recognition of our need of God.

2nd reading: Romans 5: 12-19

The middle section of Paul's letter to the Romans answers the question "How is a man justified." Paul's answer is — by God thru faith in Jesus Christ.

Our passage this morning, from chapter 5, is profoundly theological. Paul establishes a parallel between the sin of Adam and the mystery of God's grace revealed in Christ's mission of salvation. Sin is separation from God; grace is togetherness, a personal sharing in the life and love of God.

The effect of separation (the effect of sin) is death. But the gift of Christ—grace—puts an end to the separation caused by sin. Christ overcomes death.

Life which was lost by the first Adam is now restored by Christ—the new Adam. The chaos caused by the disobedience of man is corrected by the obedience of Christ.

Gospel: Matthew 4: 1-11

The gospel passage we have just heard is one of the more familiar passages. For St. Matthew, Jesus Christ is the new Moses — there are obvious parallels with Israel's desert experiences under Moses leadership in this Gospel narrative.

Each of the three temptations is a temptation to power: 1) the power to gratify one's physical needs — this is not enough to feed

man's real hunger. Man wants more than material things. 2) the power implied in God's protection is meaningless, if it is misused. 3) the power of political domination has nothing to do with man's ultimate end—it has nothing to do with the coming of God's Kingdom.

Such temptations are symbolic of the snares to which men are subjected. The enticements of status, of convenience, of comfort, of acceptance, of being part of the establishment — so often these are not really powers, but only the trappings. They are really self-gratifications; they may cause men to admire us. They lead to what sociologist Peter Berger called: "the noise of solemn assemblies." Too often we have an exaggerated opinion of ourselves, of our own importance. We want people to recognize us for what *we* think we are, not for what we really are.

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT - Cycle B

1st reading: Genesis 9: 8-15

After the flood had subsided, God accepted Noah's sacrifice as a sign of man's good will, and covenant was made with man, or a promise by God that he would never again destroy the world by water. A rainbow was a sign of the covenant, and thereafter when man would see the rainbow he would be reminded of God's promise.

This is the first in a series of covenants between God and man recorded in the Scriptures. Later there is the covenant with Abraham; the covenant with Moses on Sinai, and God's final covenant with man by the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross.

In this instance, as well as in the later pacts, God's justice and his mercy are emphasized, also his knowledge and understanding of the weakness of man.

In the responsorial psalm we recognize God's goodness and compassion.

2nd reading: I Peter 3: 18-22

Peter exhorts us to faith and perseverance in difficult times, and points to Christ as the basis for our hope—His triumph through resurrection gives us hope. He then draws an analogy between Baptism, through which we are saved, and Noah's escape from the flood waters, which some commentators call a kind of baptism. Both are a passage through water. The salvation of Noah and his family is a type of christian salvation.

Gospel: Mark 1: 12-15

Mark's account of the temptation of Jesus is very brief, almost terse. There is much symbolism in the short passage. The forty days denotes a prolonged period of time (as does the number 40 for the years of wandering in the desert; for the flood, etc. . .); the desert or wilderness was believed to be the habitat of evil spirits; it is also a place of solitude where one could meet God. The notion of temptation is a reference to the constant struggle between the forces of good and evil.

Christ now enters this struggle, and the beginning of the Messianic era is proclaimed. This is the time of fulfillment and the ultimate triumph of good over evil is at hand. "The reign of God is at hand." And the preparation for it on the part of the individual is repentance, the biblical *metanoia*, and acceptance of the Gospel.

For us Lent is a time of conversion, which is the purpose of all penance. And an annual reminder of the meaning of penance is a good thing for us; Christ's words at the end of today's gospel passage should force us to stop and look over our efforts to live as Christians (religious).

All of us can find more to do for Christ. We all have some selfishness to overcome, and we all need to make our lives more gospel-centered, more Christ-centered. The answer to that will be found in penance (among other things such as prayer and virtue).

Penitential practice is still a most misunderstood ingredient in Catholic life. It has very often been seen as something negative, as a way to put down self. Frederick Nietzsche, the German philosopher who was somewhat critical of religion, wrote about priests who preach penance. What he said has some truth to it: "They have called 'God' what was contrary to them and gave them pain. . . And they did not know how to love their god except by crucifying man." Nietzsche saw penance as an antihuman activity, part of an over-all Christian bias that instilled hatred and fear of the natural in favor of a vague and ill-defined supernatural. His view of penance has been accurate in far too many instances.

But Penance is not meant to be a means of putting self down. Rather it is meant to be a device by which we loosen the grip of selfishness in our lives so that we might be more open to God, more open to each other, so that we can become that beautiful person we are capable of becoming. Penitential practice is a necessary ingredient in the authentic Christian life—it is a concrete

acknowledgement of the fact that we always fall short in our quest for holiness and wholeness.

The need for penance is universal; the form will be specific to each individual—and this is a recent development in Catholic practice. The Church doesn't set the penance anymore:—no meat on Fridays; specific dietary laws for Lent; the young were exhorted to give up candy and put the money in mission boxes. All these were good, but gave a wrong impression.

And these practices have either disappeared or become marginal. Because of this development many have come to the conclusion that the concepts of penance and sacrifice are missing in the contemporary Church. Many have the uncomfortable feeling that we have fallen victim to the easy and comfortable religion that H. Richard Niebuhr described as “a God without wrath, bringing man without sin, into a kingdom without judgement, through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross.”

The Church has not abandoned the way of penance and sacrifice; she would be unfaithful to the gospel if she tried to do that. The Church has accepted each person as a responsible christian, capable of setting his own penitential practices. She is confident that what a man does freely is of more value than what is done under threat of punishment.

What is appropriate penitential practice for a contemporary Christian? It's difficult to say, but we can offer some general guidelines by which one can make his own decision. Penitential practice should manifest certain qualities.

First of all, it should be honest. That means it should be integrated into the entire Christian life. It should be something that directly helps me to grow in gentleness, in concern, in love. A penance is not honest if one gives up movies, but then spends all his evenings watching television. Or one gives up meat on Friday, and then eats lobster tails. In other words penitential practice is not a game.

A second quality is that it should be positive. Penance should not be seen in terms of something we give up, or in terms of pain inflicted upon self. Penance is not an endurance contest. Punishment does not teach love, but teaches fear. And we don't come to know God thru fear.

A third quality—it should flow from one's daily life. There is

generally enough stress in ones daily life without adding any. People who are always trying to do their best to be gentle, kind, considerate, e.g. parents in caring for a sick child; a young person genuinely interested in his fellow man; an older person taking time to share little movements with the young, and vice versa, these need no additional burden to improve. If we all did these things all the time, we wouldn't need any penance, but we all fail. Doing penance is the acknowledgement of failure in some area of life — being a considerate driver, a friend who listens, a stranger who welcomes — all could be practicing penance. How penitential the words “I'M SORRY, can be!! Penitential practice should flow from daily life.

If we are looking for guidelines for our Lenten practice, the II Vat. Council helps: DURING LENT, PENANCE SHOULD NOT ONLY BE INTERNAL AND INDIVIDUAL, BUT ALSO EXTERNAL AND SOCIAL. THE PRACTICE OF PENANCE SHOULD BE FOSTERED ACCORDING TO THE POSSIBILITIES OF THE PRESENT DAY AND OF A GIVEN AREA, AS WELL AS INDIVIDUAL CIRCUMSTANCES. (Const. on Liturgy 110). Christ gives us the mandate: REPENT AND BELIEVE the good news. The Church gives us the season. It is for us to put it together in the moments of our lives.

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT - Cycle C

1st reading: Deuteronomy 26: 4-10

In the form of a creed or profession of faith the early history of Israel is summarized by Moses. The fidelity of God to his promises is evident in his dealings with the people. This creed is to remind the people of the providence of God, His interventions on behalf of Israel.

The responsorial psalm extols the providence of God, and invites confidence in Him.

2nd reading: Romans 10: 8-13

The most simple form of the christian's profession of faith in Christ is included in the second reading for today's mass: “Jesus is Lord.” The profession of this faith leads to justification. Paul is saying that this faith is open to all who accept the divine origin of Christ. It makes all equal before God.

Gospel: Luke 4: 1-13

The temptations of Christ make it clear that He is perfectly human. The scene is set in the desert, and that with the forty days makes us recall the years of wandering of God's people in their exodus from the slavery in Egypt. The desert was believed to be the habitat of demons, and Christ's victory over the devil signifies His deliverance of His people from the power of the devil.

The temptations were real, and willed by God to show the reality of the incarnation. The purpose of the temptations was to turn Christ away from the divine plan of salvation.

They are the same temptations encountered by Christians to turn them away from the following of Christ: the temptation to pride, the temptation to look for the easy way, and the temptation to place one's trust and faith in someone or something other than God.

WE must resist temptation as Christ did.

See also the notes on Matthew 4:1-11 (1st Sunday of Lent, Cycle A), and on Mark 1:12-15 (1st Sunday of Lent, Cycle B).

MONDAY OF THE FIRST WEEK IN LENT

1st reading: Leviticus 19: 1-2, 11-18

The Book of Leviticus contains the so-called “Holiness Code” the theme is that God is holy, that is, separated from all that is profane. And Israel, because of her election by God and His presence among them, is also holy.

True worship which is through cultic acts, and by a life of virtue, maintains this holiness and makes it grow.

The emphasis in today’s passage is on the need to practice justice and charity: there is to be no underhanded dealing; the stronger is not to take advantage of the weaker; court proceedings must be conducted justly; there must be no hatred and vengeance.

Finally, all is summed up in the command to love one’s neighbor as oneself. And in context—the narrow context in which the Israelite thought, neighbor meant his fellow Israelite.

The New Testament, of course, will tell us that neighbor means all our fellow men.

Gospel: Matt: 25: 31-46

We have in today's Gospel the conclusion of Christ's last talk, or a summary of his last remarks in which he sets forth his moral teaching.

The scene is the second coming of Christ, with all nations gathered before Him. Jesus is called the King—a recognition of his divinity.

The basis on which all men are judged is their behavior toward their fellow man as it had been expressed in deeds.

Christ uses a simple device to stress the importance of this charity and justice that must extend to all — he identifies himself with those to whom service is given or refused, so that service to others is taken as service to Him, refusal to be just and kind is taken as a refusal to love Him.

The Gospel passage has us understand that both the good and the bad are surprised at this truth—that we encounter God in our neighbors; to the Jewish audience to which Matthew addressed himself, it was necessary that he convey this truth that there is no distinction between serving God and one's fellow man, because in their legalism, the religious leaders at Christ's time did make just such a distinction which Christ tried on occasion to point out to them as hypocrisy.

The lesson for us is very simple — it is a reminder to us that God is to be found in one another, and we must be charitable toward all we meet just as if it were Christ we were meeting.

And a consoling note — we will not be judged for the mistakes that we make, presuming we are sorry for them, but Christ will judge us on the basis of the good that we do, on the effort that we put forth.

TUESDAY — FIRST WEEK IN LENT

1st reading: Isaias 55: 10-11

A very short reading is given us today — a simple assurance that God has spoken, and promised salvation, if man will have faith in Him and do His will.

Man should not become complacent. Isaias knew the people, their history of ups and downs, and he warns them that salvation is not something magical. Man must work at it. God will certainly do his part.

Gospel: Matthew 6: 7-15

Prayer is the topic of the Gospel for today. Christ tells us how to pray — not just a mere multiplication of words, because God already knows our needs.

He then gives us a model prayer—the Our Father—which is not directed to specific or particular intentions, but with the realization of the kingdom of God. The first three petitions ask that this be soon.

The fourth petition repeats the same idea, as we ask for bread for tomorrow—give us today what will be our food for the eschatological banquet. Then there is a petition for forgiveness, and a plea to protect us from apostasy.

Following upon the prayer is a short commentary, vs. 14 and 15, which stresses the necessity of forgiveness of others to receive forgiveness from God.

WEDNESDAY – 1st WEEK OF LENT

1st reading: Jonas: 3: 1-10

Jonas had been commanded by God to preach to the pagan city of Nineve, but he fled from the task. In a storm at sea he fell overboard and was swallowed by a whale and then cast up on a strange shore, and God told him a second time to do what he commanded. This time Jonas obeyed, and the people did repent.

The whale story, which is not part of today's reading is an allegory. The lesson is important. The Ninevites repented, and this is pointed out as a striking contrast to the Israelites, who didn't pay any attention to the messengers from God—the prophets.

The behavior of the Ninevites—the proclamation of a fast by the King, the repentance of all the people—saved the city, which is precisely why Jonas tried to run away from the job. Jonas feared that they would repent.

To Jonas God was the God of the Jews only. But the point of the story is that God is concerned for all men.

Also, God wanted to shame the Israelites into repentance; they needed a sort of harsh awakening at this time to call them back to true worship. And God warns them by favoring this pagan city.

Gospel: Luke 11: 29-32

During the many months of Christ's ministry a fair number of people still couldn't accept him. They finally couldn't hold back their curiosity any longer and Christ understood that they wanted some kind of striking sign or proof that He was the emissary from God that He claimed to be.

But Christ said the only proof He would give of His credentials is that which Jonas offered at Nineve. Jonas presented them with the word of God and they responded—they repented.

Christ would do the same—preach the word of God, and call the people to repent. Christ was trying to have them learn from the Scriptures which they claimed to know so well—he wanted them to be ashamed for refusing to accept him by making the reference to the conversion of the pagan city, while the Jews refused to heed the prophets.

The Queen of Sheba is praised because she actively sought the

truth. Here Christ rebukes the Pharisees and Scribes for resisting the truth.

Both of today's lessons call for a faith in God, as we are assured in both that God cares for all mankind. He was not just the God of the Jews. Christ came to make that clear. Salvation is for all who will accept Him.

THURSDAY — 1st WEEK IN LENT

1st reading: Esther 14: passim.

The book of Esther tells of a plot to destroy the Jews in exile in the Persian empire. Esther is the heroine of the story. She was chosen queen, and by appealing to the king she saved the people from the jealousy of one of the king's ministers.

Today's passage contains her prayer before approaching the king. She is frightened because of a law that forbids anyone to enter the king's presence without being called; unless the king spare the person's life, that person would be killed.

But Esther takes the risk for her people. The lesson is one of trust in God to whom she prayed. She was convinced that God would save the people, if she would do what was possible on her part.

Gospel: Matthew 7: 7-12

In chapter six of the Gospel Christ tells his disciples to seek first the kingdom of God, and all their needs will be taken care of. The same theme is repeated in our passage for today.

Christ emphasizes the truth that God hears our prayers and does answer them, and encourages us to petition His father,—for the very reason that God is our Father, and has a fatherly concern for us.

He uses an example — at times even evil men do good for their children, so much more than will God—goodness Himself—act toward us.

It is, like the first reading, an exhortation to trust in God. And it concludes with the golden rule — do to others as you would have them do to you.

A lesson we can draw from today's readings is that prayer must be an habitual part of our lives,—not just something we do when we *want* something from God. For us prayer must be a way of life; prayer must be reflected in the way we behave. That makes God all the closer to us, and we are then convinced that He knows our hurts, our interests, our loves, our desires — and in his love, all

things will work for our good. It is difficult to imagine that if a man never prays, that he can do so sincerely in a time of sudden crisis. It isn't impossible—sudden conversion—but it is rare.

Something of the confidence that we must have in prayer is reflected in the story of the little girl who was taunted by her friends that God had not heard her prayer because she didn't receive what she asked for. And she simply told them: "God answered my prayer; it's just that He said NO."

Or St. Augustine put it this way: "If our prayers seem not to be answered, it is either because we do ask rightly, or we do not ask for the right thing."

Even our praying demands of us faith and confidence — and expectation and hope.

FRIDAY — 1st WEEK IN LENT

1st reading: Ezechiel: 18: 21-28

The Jews in exile believed that they were being punished for the sins of their forefathers. They believed in a corporate guilt. This attitude shows up at other places in the Scriptures, too. They despaired and were fatalistic, and indirectly they excused themselves from any sin; and God, they thought, was acting unfairly towards them.

Ezechiel tells them that each man is accountable for himself only. In today's passage he tells them that if a wicked man truly repents and lives in accord with the law of God, he will be forgiven. God will give him forgiveness if he truly turns away from evil.

On the other hand, if a virtuous man turns away from God and does evil, his prior good will be to no avail.

It is not God who is unfair, but rather the man who rejects God.

Gospel: Matt: 5: 20-26

We return to the theme again that externals are unimportant; mere external observance of the law is not important, but the spirit of the law and an observance based on or motivated by the love of God.

The Pharisees are castigated again in this preaching, precisely because they put more emphasis on the letter of the law than on the spirit that gives value to a law. The letter of the law forbids murder; but the spirit of the law goes deeper—it forbids even anger which could lead up to murder.

The latter part of the reading emphasizes the urgency of reconciliation — we should not allow any hurt that we have caused to perdure. Making up or making some kind of reparation is important. Here, precisely, the external act of reconciliation is important, if it is a sign of true sorrow for injury caused.

There is a lot of practical application that we can make of the need to be forgiving and the daily need for reconciliation among ourselves.

SATURDAY of 1st WEEK IN LENT

1st reading: Deuteronomy 26: 16-19

The verses which make up this morning's readings are a concluding exhortation to be faithful to the law—the covenant. The people of the present generation to whom the law had just been read in a liturgical rite is now asked to renew the covenant with God.

They are reminded that Moses was a mediator for the people; there is the reminder again that God will bless them for their fidelity; and the people's response is a declaration that they are ready to keep the law.

Thus the liturgical cultic act was (and is) an opportunity for the individual of each generation to personally renew his covenant with God.

In like manner our sacraments are personal acts of Christ on our behalf — and so an opportunity for us to personally experience thru grace the redemptive acts of Christ.

Gospel: Matthew 5: 43-48

Good works is the subject again of our gospel for today. Matthew quotes the precept obliging us to love our neighbor. Nowhere in the Old Testament is there a command to hate one's enemies, but the Israelites had a limited understanding of neighbor—a fellow Israelite. The Israelite didn't feel obliged to love one from another nation.

The context in which we are told to love our enemies would probably mean to the early christian that he should love the persecutors of the early Church — with the purpose, of course, of winning them over to Christ.

The point made in the reading is that the spirit of the law of love demands that a christian's love be indiscriminate, just as God is indiscriminate in distributing the sun and rain to all peoples.

– If a christian tries to love all, then he will be perfect, as God is perfect, i.e., he will be approaching the perfection of God.

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT - Cycle A

1st reading: Genesis 12: 1-4

Our first reading is from the Genesis traditions about Abraham. The compiler of these traditions wished to present an account of Hebrew History which embodied his perception of God's unfolding purpose for his people. To experience righteousness and justice Israel must become a nation. In the call of Abram, God demands that he give up his pagan past, and move on to a land of the Lord's choosing. The point to be made is that it is God who takes the initiative. If Israel hopes to become a great nation, then she must follow the Lord's commands. The reward promised for doing so is divine blessings.

The responsorial psalm is an expression of faith in God's fidelity—an acknowledgement that He fulfilled the promises to Abraham.

2nd reading: 2 Timothy 1: 8-10

The second letter to Timothy is both personal and pastoral. The short passage which we read today is a miniature *credo* or profession of faith. Paul reminds us that the christian is called to a holy life, which is not dependent on good works, but on the purpose of God manifested in Jesus Christ. . We depend on the grace of God.

Gospel: Matthew 17: 1-9

Our first reading this morning describes the call of Abraham to be the father of God's people; the second reading is a reminder of this call, and our Gospel, by presenting the figures of Moses and Elijah, shows not only the continuity between the Old and New Testaments, but also indicates that Jesus Christ is the Messiah—the Savior promised of old; and He is indeed God present among men in the world.

Throughout the history of God's people, He has shown himself at times as a hidden God, as seen often in the Old Testament; and as a God revealed to men in their midst, as seen thru Jesus Christ in the New Testament. God is present in the liturgy — in His Word and in the Eucharist. Yet there are many ways in the world where God is not so clearly present, because men forget that God is indeed with them, sometimes because they want to forget Him.

They forget God, because while they live their own lives, when

the Lord touches their lives, they cannot go on as they did before. Men sometimes do not want to change, and so they conveniently forget God.

When God spoke to Moses, he made the Israelites a great nation—he changed them from what they had once been. When God sent His son, Jesus, He changed the world. Men could no longer act as they once had acted. No longer could they do the things that came naturally to them. Where once God was hidden from his people, Jesus made it clear that God was walking among His people, showing them the way that they should act and deal with other people.

If we turn to the incident in today's Gospel—the Transfiguration—I think we can learn something. Taking the text as it is, we have in the description of the evangelist a mild theatrical spectacle. The passage is not without a sense of drama. In reality, there was no need for Christ to be transformed. This need was in the eyes of the beholder—the apostles (and now us).

This gospel passage is an awesome imperative which binds each one of us to become what we want to be and what we are usually incapable of being. (Louis Evely). Perhaps that is why the apostles wanted to stay there on the mountain—It was good to be there; they felt good about it.

Christ has to bring them back to reality. They realized the need to change, and now they had to do something about it.

Being convinced of the presence of God, we have experienced what the Transfiguration really was. WE experience it in moments of prayer when Christ seems so close, so vital, so real. We have sensed it on those occasions when the intimate light of friendship revealed us as we are to one another.

We must respond to the call of God by recognizing His presence among us — not just in the liturgy and in prayer. We must be ready to encounter God in many different moments of our lives, moments even when He might seem hidden — when we meet someone who is frightened, someone who is lonely, someone who is shouting for acceptance, someone who is easy to get along with, and someone who is difficult to get along with or who makes things difficult for us.

We can work a transformation in others. We can bring freedom to those whose faces are closed, hard or masked in indifference; we can give a sense of dignity to those who have been humiliated; we can bring a sense of or a realization of their true worth to those

who believe in their own unimportance.

Because Jesus Christ is not with us the exact same way that he was with his disciples, at times he can seem hidden to us. But Christ is, God is, present to us — really, and we can experience His presence, in so many different ways — in the joys we experience and share; in the work we accomplish; in the virtue we accomplish; in the happiness we radiate; in the comfort and sympathy we give . . . and so on.

Philip Bailey, brought out this idea of what we must do and how we must act because of God in the world. This poem, or part of one was written about 90 years ago.

LET EACH MAN THINK HIMSELF AN ACT OF GOD
HIS MIND A THOUGHT, HIS LIFE A BREATH OF GOD;
AND LET EACH TRY, BY GREAT THOUGHTS AND
GOOD DEEDS,
TO SHOW THE MOST OF HEAVEN HE HATH IN HIM.

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT - Cycle B

1st reading: Genesis 22: 1-2, 9-13, 15-18

The faith of Abraham is the important issue in today's first reading. One can readily imagine the mental anguish of the man. Human sacrifice was repugnant to him, though not unknown, as it was practiced by the Canaanites among whom he lived. Abraham thought God was asking the human sacrifice of his son, Isaac and he prepared to obey.

God intervenes—He got what He wanted, absolute trust and faith from Abraham. And God repeats his promise of blessings.

This reading gives us occasion to reflect on two things: the absolute gratuity of God. He chooses whom He wills, and it is our task to accept His graciousness and kindness. Secondly, the example of faith evidenced by Abraham reminds us to examine our own faith.

The responsorial psalm is an act of faith, and a promise of sacrifice.

2nd reading: Romans 8: 31-34

Paul summarizes in hymn-like fashion the effects of the love of God for us: freedom from sin and a promise of glory. All of this is

made possible because of Christ's love as manifesting God's love for us.

Paul asks a series of rhetorical questions. The obvious answer is that if God is on our side (and He is because He chooses us), then we have nothing to fear.

The passage is meant to inspire faith, and the succeeding verses tell us that nothing can come between us and the love of God, as long as we make every effort to live our Christian life. The words of the French theologian, Yves Congar are to the point: "Here below the Christian life consists not so much in being a Christian but in trying to become one as best we can."

Gospel: Mark 9: 2-10

The faith of the apostles is bolstered up by this grace of seeing Christ in His divine splendor. It was intended to assist them in their fidelity in the difficult moments that would follow later—Christ suffering and dying.

In prophecy, and this is possibly one of the purposes for including it in the Gospel account, the glory of Christ made visible on this occasion of His Transfiguration, was a foreshadowing of that glory which would be His after the Resurrection.

To us, as to the apostles, this is to be a reminder of just whom we serve—God Himself. It is to encourage us in our christian and religious living. Seeing Christ in glory, by faith, should make us all the more conscious of the fact that we are striving to share that glory and triumph.

All of us can probably remember some occasion on which we were in amazement and wonderment at what we witnessed—some striking event which we will never forget, and which we will talk about from time to time. If not in the very scene itself, then because of the technological miracle of television. Some event like the moon or space shots.

This is wonderment, amazement, at the natural, the tangible. Amazement and awe are basic to religious experience, too. It is an appropriate response to the greatness of God. The fact that people who have lived before us have encountered God in this way is the foundation for much of our religious tradition today. The recording of their religious experiences in religious history make them live on and make it possible for us to re-live them.

When confronted with experience of the divine, men often do behave strangely. So the reaction of the Apostles who witnessed

the transfiguration is very natural — they were afraid; Peter spoke nonsense. They were transported out of their usual view of reality. Later, when Christ was in agony, and died, the experience of a vision of His glory would sustain them.

One can imagine, too, the intense experience of being in the presence of God that was Abraham's, when he realized that God's holiness makes human sacrifice an abomination, and that the true God loves life.

Our worship—our liturgy—is designed to make possible the experience of awe and wonder in the presence of God. It is to enable us to encounter God through the person of Jesus Christ. It is to create a sacred atmosphere in which the reality of God can become deeply impressed on us. The sacraments are to be for us occasions and acts wherein we unforgettably encounter God.—faith experiences of the reality of the divine.

Too frequently we take the liturgy as something merely external — words, gestures, rites, without inner meaning. If the Mass is reduced to this, then it is emptied of religious importance. It becomes something to attend and get through, not something to experience.

The Eucharist is the bearer of the awesome events surrounding the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Behind every celebration of the Mass are his experiences of suffering, dying and rising again. Words and gestures are simply ways of communicating these realities of Jesus' life to us. Doing the Mass together means that we are invited to enter these profound events and make them our own. That is the meaning of the acclamation we make after the consecration:

WHEN WE EAT THIS BREAD AND DRINK THIS BLOOD
WE PROCLAIM YOUR DEATH, LORD JESUS,
UNTIL YOU COME IN GLORY.

Changes have been made to make the liturgy more meaningful and more intelligible. That together with the mystery that it is are to be part of our religious experience. WE seek to know God, or something of God, and seek to experience him as part of this knowing. Both can happen in our worship: in silence, in great moments of music, in times of personal reflection. All these can lead to the living God, the awareness of his majesty. And in addition these can be signs of our unity and fraternal love.

So some sense of religious awe is fundamental to christian life. Without it, religion seems part of someone else's life, not our own.

It is not enough for Jesus, his apostles and Abraham to have encountered this divine presence. We, too, must dare to open ourselves to this experience, at least if we wish to become truly religious people.

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT - Cycle C

1st reading: Genesis 15: 5-12, 17-18

Abram is presented as a man of faith. God makes promises to him, and seals these with a covenant, the sign of which is walking between the halves of slain animals. The “birds of prey” who swoop down on the carcasses are symbolic of the dangers that will threaten the covenant. A mood is created, a mood of solemnness, by the setting of the sun, the deep trance of Abram, and the darkness. God is symbolized by fiery figures. (This symbolism will appear later in the Exodus narrative: the pillar of fire). Only God passes through the pieces of animals as the covenant is onesided. God made the promises and asked nothing of Abram, except faith. The reading highlights the value and power of faith, and the goodness of God.

The responsorial psalm is a prayer of trust in the form of a lament. Even the request for pity is colored by this trust and the certainty of being heard.

2nd reading: Philippians 3:17-4:1

Paul warns this community against certain Jewish-Christians who were insisting on maintaining Jewish practices of ritual observances. In opposition to this he proposes himself as a model to imitate, because he is an imitator of Christ. Paul could also have been warning the people against some christians who were not leading proper christian lives.

HE reminds all that the christians primary concern is spiritual because of their “citizenship in heaven.”

Gospel: Luke 9: 28-36

In St. Luke's account of the Transfiguration of Jesus, the figures of Moses and Elijah bear witness to Christ. The apostles evidently needed some encouragement, and Christ knew it. Allow-

ing the three He had chosen to see Him for a brief moment in His divine splendor, would provide just the grace they needed, and though Christ had told them not to talk about what they had seen, and experienced, they probably did among Jesus's close followers.

Probably one of the most important phrases in the account of this incident is the injunction to the apostles who witnessed it: "Listen to Him." Moses and Elijah had disappeared, and only Christ remained.

The glory of Christ made visible at His Transfiguration was a foreshadowing of the glory that was to be His after the Resurrection. To us, as to the apostles, this is a reminder of just whom we serve—God Himself. It is an encouragement in our christian efforts. Seen in the light of faith, it should make us all the more conscious of the fact that we are striving to share Christ's glory and triumph.

MONDAY OF 2nd WEEK IN LENT

1st reading: Daniel: 9: 4b-10

Today's first reading from the 9th chapter of the Book of Daniel is part of a prayer in which the community acknowledges its guilt, and asks of God the restoration of Jerusalem.

While in exile the people rebelled against God—they thought God was unfair in allowing them to be oppressed. But as they began again to listen to the prophets, God listened to them.

In today's reading Israel first confesses that she has sinned, and been unfaithful to the covenant; she had been disobedient to God and the prophets who spoke in his name.

The central verses are an acknowledgement of God's justice, and Israel is shamefaced before Him. Finally she appeals to His mercy and asks forgiveness.

Gospel: Luke 6: 36-38

Love of others — a generous and active interest in the true welfare of others — is a characteristic virtue of the disciple of Christ. Brotherly love plays a very important part in Luke's Gospel. Many examples of forgiveness are recorded in his account.

Luke preaches that love should not be deterred by hatred or abuse — we must love even in the face of that. *Now* are we to seek a return of love.

He holds up the example of God for us to imitate — acting in such way as he points out is being merciful as God is merciful.

The point Luke makes is this, that we are all in need of forgiveness, and the more generous we are to others in loving and forgiving them, the more God will pour out his gifts of mercy and forgiveness on us.

TUESDAY OF 2nd WEEK IN LENT

1st reading: Isaias 1: 18, 16-20

One of the first lessons that Isaias teaches the people is that sacrifice without accompanying virtue is worthless.

After castigating the rulers and the people, and comparing their immorality with that of Sodom and Gomorrah, Isaiah told them God could not accept their ritual sacrifices, because they were just empty gestures. They must put aside evil and do good. Today's passage describes how—

Doing good is described, above all, in terms of duties towards neighbor, represented by the orphan and widow. Isaias reminds the people that if they sincerely repent and turn to God in obedience to the preaching that he did, even the most serious sins of the people would be forgiven, and they will be saved.

If they refuse to repent, they will be destroyed.

Gospel: Matthew 23: 1-12

Judging from today's Gospel passage, things apparently hadn't changed much from the time of Isaias to the time after Christ's death and the early years of the Church. The 23rd chapter of Matthew's Gospel is a summary of Christ's charges against the Scribes and Pharisees.

Matthew, remember was deeply involved in a controversy with the Jews. He argued to convince them that Christ was the Messiah, and that they had, therefore, better accept his teaching, and change their way of life.

Matthew paints in words a caricature of the Pharisees. It is a portrait of unbelief at any time.

The authority of the Scribes isn't questioned—legally they were the religious rulers. Christ's criticism isn't aimed at their teaching either, but at the discrepancy between what they teach and the way they act. He accuses them of hypocrisy—of a lack of brotherly love, a lack of charity; he accuses them of vanity and ostentation.

St. Matthew in pointing out this is preaching to the christian community that this is behavior unbecoming a follower of Christ. The Christian must be humble and the servant of all. Today's passage follows the passage in which Matthew records the two great commandments — love of God, and love of neighbor.

In placing the castigation of Pharisees after this explanation of

the meaning of love of God and neighbor, their lack of it stands out all the more.

The simple lesson we are to draw from today's readings is that we must not only say we are Christians, we must act as such; we must not only profess to be religious, and appear as such to others, but we must live and love all men as brothers. Our practice of virtue must spring from and be an indication of our interior convictions.

WEDNESDAY – 2nd WEEK OF LENT

1st reading: Jeremias: 18: 18-20

Jeremias was one of the prophets who was killed for doing the work of God. This passage is one that records an unsuccessful attempt on his life. It is a foreshadowing of what Christ himself would experience. His enemies would try to entrap him in his speech.

Jeremias realized that if they succeeded in killing him, that would be unimportant, because the priestly instruction or the prophetic word would not cease with his death. God would raise up other prophets.

What hurt Jeremias is that he has stood before the Lord asking forgiveness for the evil men who wanted his death, and they are now repaying him with more evil.

Gospel: 20: 17-28

For a third time Christ predicted his passion and death. But from what follows, it is evident that the apostles still did not grasp the meaning of what He was saying. They still expected some kind of worldly triumph.

In this text we have an example of brotherly love—community love in the apostolic college. Matthew spares the reputation of James and John by having their mother make the request for the first two places for them. But Matthew tells us that the rest of them still became angry at the brothers.

Christ practically dismisses the whole question by saying that it is His Father who determines such things.

But he draws a lesson from the episode — a lesson of brotherly love that the Gospel readings this week have stressed. Whoever has a position of greatness and responsibility in the Church must be the servant of all, and Christ points to Himself as the example of one who has come to serve others, even to the point of giving His life so that all may be saved.

Both of today's readings teach us that unselfish service is what Jesus requires of us; greatness comes from serving the needs of others without thought of recompense. God will take care of the reward.

You may, in the course of your ministry and apostolic activity, feel that you are not appreciated, that you are not accomplishing

anything.

Let the perseverance of God's prophets of old, and the example of Christ Himself, examples of true brotherly love and concern, be an inspiration to greater efforts and charitable concern for all peoples.

THURSDAY — 2nd WEEK OF LENT

1st reading: Jeremiah: 17: 5-10

Biblical imagery is used to teach a lesson in today's first reading. There is a comparison between those who trust in God and those who rely solely on men.

In the dry Near East a tree that is not near a source of water never gets beyond the size of a bush. Because of a lack of water it eventually dies. In the same way a man who forsakes God and puts his trust in men, removes himself from the source of life.

On the other hand, the man who places his trust in God is like a green tree near a source of water from which it continually draws. Such a tree can withstand the dry season, because it has the strength to endure.

Jeremias, who admittedly had a difficult time as an emissary of God, could speak from experience—he drew his strength from his faith and trust in God.

The last two verses of today's reading point out that we cannot hide anything from God.

Gospel: Luke: 16: 19-31

This very familiar parable points out a lack of brotherly love. Here was a man—a very wealthy one—who could have been a great and generous benefactor to his less fortunate brothers (neighbors), but was not. He abused the good things, the material good, that God had given him.

The sin of the rich man in the parable is not in what he did with his money, but his blind indifference to the plight of the poor.

The response of Abraham to the now suffering rich man, brings out a second lesson, and one equally important. God's emissaries, Moses and the prophets, have pointed out the way of salvation, and if the Pharisees will not listen to them, no other sign will be of any use.

There is an implication in the fact that since Luke writes after Christ's death and resurrection, that the Pharisees and the Jewish people had a sign and refused to accept it for what it was, in that they rejected and still reject Christ the Messiah.

The parable certainly preaches a true brotherly love—the need for it, and it is a reminder to us who have an abundance of good

things, to share with those less fortunate than we. That we certainly do in our missions and in our work, but it preaches to us the importance of interior detachment and the need for a spirit of penance, as the prayers of the lenten season so often remind us.

Our penance and self-denial — in whatever way we do or make it — is an expression of our brotherly concern for all men. And it is a means of intercession with God on their behalf.

FRIDAY 2nd WEEK OF LENT

1st reading: Genesis 37: 3-4, 12-13, 17-28

The story of Joseph, Jacob's most loved son, is different from the other incidents in the first book of the Bible. The story stands out because of its lack of divine interventions and special revelations which mark other narratives.

Here we see that God can work out His will through the ordinary course of human events. Evil was turned to good. The evil of Joseph's brothers, their plottings, will eventually bring about the salvation of Jacob's family.

In keeping with the theme of the week — brotherly love — today's reading shows a decided lack of it. It shows the jealousy of the brothers, and the evil and hurt that it can cause in a community or family. But since we know the rest of the story, the final outcome, we know that brotherly love is the saving virtue.

Gospel: Matthew 21: 33-43, 45, 46

The parable of the evil tenants is one with allegorical detail: The vineyard is Israel; the tenants are the leaders of the people; the servants are the prophets of the Old Law; the son is Jesus himself.

The point of the parable is very clear: since the Jews have rejected the prophets sent by God, and even the Messiah Christ himself, they have forfeited their status as the chosen people of God. This is the final rejection of the covenant on their part, so God turns to others — to all mankind.

I think it is important to remember that this parable is in the Gospel of Matthew who had written directly for the Jews in an effort to convince them to accept Christ. Matthew, I think, was trying to show them the great grace they had lost but could recover.

To the parable, is appended a quotation from Ps. 118, v. 42 — it is, as I see it, an appeal of the early Church, motivated by the desire of the Christians in their universal love for all men, to invite the Jewish people back into the ranks of the people of God.

It is strong language — to accuse them of rejecting the keystone or cornerstone — but motivated by brotherly concern and a desire to share salvation with all.

May I propose that we see it as an exhortation to zeal — let our love for all make us zealous in our (priestly and religious) apostolic efforts to make Christ someone meaningful in the lives of all with whom we deal and come into contact in the course of our daily living.

SATURDAY 2nd WEEK OF LENT

1st reading: Micah: 7-14-15, 18-20

Our reading this morning is a prayer. It comes from the time after the exile when the Jews were trying to rehabilitate themselves.

In the first part they ask the Lord to once again give them good land, and bring them out of the hills, and in the second part they praise God for forgiving them and for not remaining angry with them; they express their trust in his forgiveness.

In their prayer they remind God of His promise to Abraham and Jacob to be their God, and to be merciful to them.

Gospel: Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32

Genuine love is the emphatic lesson of today's parable. It was Christ's answer to the affected scandal taken by the Pharisees because Christ associated with the people who needed him — sinners and the poor.

The emphasis in the parable is on the loving father. The point of the story is God's great happiness over the return of the sinner and the incredible mercy he is ready to show. And I think this second lesson is the more important one.

The Pharisees could not be understanding of one who violated one of their almost impossible precepts. The parable chides them for this, using the elder son, who is unforgiving, as representative of their self-righteousness. Whereas the gentleness of the father is a reminder to them to genuinely forgive and be understanding of the weaknesses of people.

It is an exhortation to brotherly love and understanding.

We are a bit like both sons. We condemn faults in others while we are guilty of some imperfections ourselves, and we have no difficulty excusing ourselves. The least we can do is act in the same way to others. . .

But if we are desirous of imitating the perfection or holiness of God, then we must make efforts to overlook the faults of others, while being conscious of our own, and direct our major effort to truly loving others by being as virtuous as we can.

It is so easy to be self-righteous, so difficult to refrain from even mildly rebuking others.

Brotherly love—the nature of brotherly love which we have reflected on this week in our liturgy—is summed up in the golden rule: Do unto others as you would have them do to you.

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT - Cycle A

1st reading: Exodus 17: 3-7

The theme of our first reading mirror's today's Gospel: water and life. Water is an element of security essential to man's life. Nowhere is this need more emphatic than in the arid conditions of desert life.

The details of the story—the complaints of the people, the location of the place and the naming of the place—should not distract us from the main point of the text: the water is a gift of the Lord to those who are dying from thirst.

The people were desperately short of water; they looked to God for help. This was only to be expected because he had already intervened on their behalf, by making the water of Marah drinkable (it was bitter, but God purified it), and when they lacked food he sent them quail and manna.

However, the faith of the people was tainted. They were more concerned with their physical needs than with their destiny in God's salvation plan. They complained of the hardships involved in following Moses, and aggressively challenged God to be as good as his word, if he could. These two attitudes were enshrined in the names of the places where these incidents took place. Psalm 95 speaks of the people hardening their hearts at Meribah and Massah in the desert. "Meribah" means to quarrel, and "Massah" means to challenge. This reference in this Psalm is to these events. It is our responsorial psalm for today.

The second point is that in spite of the inadequacy of their faith God's power was again exercised for them in their hour of need, thru the use of Moses's rod, which was the symbol of his power by which they had been rescued from Egypt.

There are Messianic symbols in this passage worthy of mention. The power of God is represented as associated with the rock from which the drinking water had come. This recalls the custom of addressing God as the "Rock of Salvation," which expresses his strength and permanence, and his role as the source of stability of his chosen people, and the object of their faith.

Secondly, the significance of *water* as the condition and cause of life — this is much more expressive in a dry country like Palestine, where water is scarce, than say here in the U.S., where water is abundant.

The responsorial psalm recalls Israel's sin in the desert, and calls on us not to repeat it.

2nd reading: Romans 5: 1-2, 5-8

This second reading consists of two short sections taken from the very significant chapter five of Paul's letter to the Romans. Paul introduces the concept of justification. What he then describes is the power of hope.

Hope can only be fully understood by those who have experienced a deep sense of sinfulness—which is not to be equated with the psychological state which we call “guilt complex.” In the opening chapters of Paul's letter to the Romans he had explained that all men—Jew and Gentile—are involved in sin and in need of God's saving power. To make the transition from sin to grace is not possible for man on his own power. God's help is needed.

Man must open himself by faith to the initiative of God. The Gospels are simply the announcement that God has taken the initiative by reconciling the world with himself thru the redemptive acts of Jesus Christ. So the barrier which separated man from God is broken down, and today's text tells us that we have free access to God (vs. 2); we are at peace with Him (vs. 1), and we have hope (vs. 2). This is the theme of the contemporary theology of hope.

The object of this hope is life with God thru Christ, a reality which has been achieved in principle (i.e. God has done his part), but not yet fully realized in each of us as long as we are alive on this earth. Full realization is achieved only when we become united with God in eternity. So in this sense the full redemption of the world is still incomplete — as long as men are alive. But we live in hope of that ultimate achievement.

The grounds for that hope—the reasons for it: when man was in sin and so in need that God would act on his behalf, God did just that in the Old Testament, and by the acts of Christ. Now that we are reconciled, we still need Christ to lead us to life with God. Paul assures us that Christ is even more willing to give us the support we need in our time than he was to die for us in the first place.

WE must remember that St. Paul was always very conscious of sin in the world and denounced superficial complacency, a complacent attitude among christians. Paul is thought, by some, to have been a gloomy person, but I don't think he was—there is a very strong current of optimism and joy in his writings, and it comes thru best in his fiery sermons. For St. Paul, human nature was indeed fallen and sinful; but it was a fallen nature that had

been abundantly redeemed. For the christian alive, this can only be a cause or reason for hope.

Gospel: John: 4: 5-42

The narrative element of this passage is easy to follow and needs no comment. The significance of the passage is in the transition from a scene of everyday life to the presentation of theological teaching. The woman sees that Christ's words: "If only you recognized God's gift, and who it is that is asking you for a drink, you would have asked him instead, and he would have given you living water", were not meaningful in the literal everyday sense, so she asked an apparently foolish question to get an explanation.

Living water in everyday parlance or speech would mean to the Jew that which flows from a spring, as opposed to that collected in a tank or well. Jesus asserts that he is able to give her a reality of greater value than the water which she could haul up from the well at which they were sitting.

There is no explanation of the precise nature of this life giving 'gift of God', but certain aspects of it are implied.

1) This new life is incompatible with a sinful life; moral conversion is inevitably linked with spiritual conversion.

2) Secondly, this new life requires a true worship of God, which is not confined to a place (i.e., like the Temple in Jerusalem). It is an attitude, a conviction, or the result of an attitude and conviction.

3) This is the life for which Israel had been designated, and now we are designated for it. Vs. 41 tells us that collaborators are needed to bring about the realization of this truth. And we are to understand that we are those collaborators today.

The words of Christ in today's gospel should cause us to be hope-filled. The rich symbolism of water impresses on us the need of God's grace and help. And the hope held out to us and for us by St. Paul should be a source of encouragement in our efforts for Christ and His Church. We religious, especially, should be conscious of the incompleteness of redemption, in that we are perhaps more conscious of the failings of mankind, beginning with ourselves, and so we realize that much remains to be done to bring to completeness the work of Christ. And we are specially invited to share in that work. Our faith does not depend on stories and miracles; rather we have the experience of life with and in Christ,

which allows us to confess that He really is the Savior of the world; Our charity impells us to share our grace and convictions with others—to hold out to them the same hopes we have—the reward and recognition of God, a loving Father.

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT - Cycle B

1st reading: Exodus 20: 1-17

The ten commandments are basic principles of morality and norms of religious observance. They are a summary of the will of God for all mankind. They are part of the covenant between God and man made on Mt. Sinai. As basic principles they do call for explanation, and even the Old Testament expresses them in terms of the civil law of the time. We Christians, too, have adapted them to the more demanding charity of the New Law.

The responsorial psalm praises God's glory as reflected in His law.

2nd reading: I Corinthians 1: 22-25

The down-to-earth practicality of the Semite, and the inclination to speculation or philosophy of the Greeks is challenged by St. Paul. The Cross of Christ, which for St. Paul symbolizes or means the whole salvation event, should satisfy both. It is the greatest of signs of God's love, and ultimately in the resurrection event the highest purpose of life is revealed. Thus the Jews have their "sign" and the Greeks their "wisdom."

Gospel: John 2: 13-25

It is clear to us, and I suspect to most of the people who heard Christ's remark about rebuilding the temple, that he was not referring to the material temple in Jerusalem, should it be destroyed. His act of cleansing the temple was a protest against the profanation of the House of God, and a prophetic gesture that a purification was about to take place in the messianic era that had arrived.

The whole Jewish sacrificial system had lost its meaning, and purpose — it no longer brought man closer to God. Christ let this be known by his words, and now by deed.

Still, Christ's action on this occasion probably caused some consternation, which wasn't helped any by the answers he gave to justify his radical action. Only later, after the resurrection, would the full significance of the event be understood, and the full significance and meaning of his words about rebuilding the temple in three days.

There is a significance for us in this event. Jesus' coming marked the end of an era. The curtain had come down on its symbol—the

elaborate temple worship. Jesus, the risen Messiah, will take the place of the old temple and all it stood for. The center of God's presence among His people would no longer be a place; it would now be a person. In this new temple—the risen person of Christ—would dwell all the fullness of the Spirit of God. And that Spirit would come to those who believed and dwell with them so that they would, in their turn, become temples of God.

Unlike St. John who tells the incident of Jesus cleansing the temple at the beginning of his ministry, St. Matthew tells it at the end of Jesus' public ministry, because for him it is important that he add it to his gospel of so many texts and old Testament prophecies which show the Jews that Israel indeed had reached its high point, and the Messiah had come. St. John's point of emphasis is different.

John is much more conscious, not just that the action in the temple is the sign of the messias, but that Jesus Himself is the temple—the temple of the new law, the new covenant, which will be sealed with His blood.

This is the man, and John knows it, who is more than a new law for the Israelites, and even more than a new temple for the Jewish nation.

He is to be the light of the world, a shock to Jewish nationalism, and a puzzle to Greek philosophers. When Jesus passed through death His life took on new dimension. It is world-wide. He will not be just a great idea as the Greeks might have expected, He will be for all men a light and a love, a hidden but real presence in human existence. If this is true, then why does Jesus bother with the temple? Why is he so concerned about it? Why not just abandon it? Why call it, so proudly, "My Father's house?"

I think, because Jesus shows an understanding of man's religious needs. He is not against the temple—or today we would say, he is not opposed to building churches, shrines and places of worship. But ultimately, it is not the temple, but the lord of the temple, that matters. It is not the number of worshippers who crowd a church, but the number who change their hearts and lives, who become the real sign of religious life.

A house and home are necessary for a family, but if the house is destroyed in a flood or by fire, the family still exists; a man still exists when his body is consigned to the grave; a country, if its capitol is seized by an enemy. Israel had survived before without a temple, in exile. But the people longed to rebuild it because

churches and temples have a role to play. It is only when they become institutionalized, places more of pride than of service, that they lose their role in religious life.

The temple and the priesthood had been the center of life and worship, but missing was the concern for men as brothers and God as Father, the element of a man sacrificing himself for others as Jesus does.

The new temple that God will raise up is the man Jesus in his new life, the resurrected life. His life is the life of the Church, and members are the members of his body. This is the new temple, and it is his extension into space and time and all of history. Jesus is saying in the gospel message today that the new sign will not be a miracle or God's intervention in history. It will be a group of people, the church, who remind the earth that there is one who is father, and He is God alone. And there is one who is neighbor, but he is everyone, and he should be cherished and loved. The Church will be a sign through people who will not hesitate to sacrifice themselves for each other and to bring this kind of self-giving love to a family and community. This will be the true sign of the new covenant.

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT - Cycle C

1st reading: Exodus 3: 1-8, 13-15

The call of Moses and the revelation of God to him make up our first reading. As in our first reading for last Sunday, God's presence is signified by fire — a burning bush. God identifies Himself as the "God of your father," and more specifically as the God of Abraham . . . Isaac . . . and Jacob. Having been so long in exile in Egypt, many of the Israelites had become idolaters, as their Egyptian masters were.

God will later make Himself known to all the people through Moses, and He will make a covenant with them. For the present Moses is to make Him known to the people, and to tell them of His intention to liberate them.

The responsorial psalm is a sensitive hymn of thanksgiving to God for his goodness. It is both a personal and a communal prayer.

2nd reading: I Corinthians 10: 1-6, 10-12

Israel's history during the years of wandering in the desert contains a warning for Christians. In spite of God's many acts of

kindness on behalf of the people: providing a passage through the sea, feeding them with manna, and giving them water to drink, not all the people were faithful to God. Those who were unfaithful were punished.

Some commentators see a great deal of typology in this short passage: "Our fathers:" by incorporation into Christ all Christians are descendants of Abraham; "the cloud" symbolizes the presence of God, His protective presence; passing through the sea is a type of baptism; the spiritual food and drink is symbolic of the Eucharist.

What Paul is preaching is that the possibility of sin is a reality for the christian, and all should be on guard against it.

Gospel: Luke 13: 1-9

The urgency of repentance is the main point at issue in this gospel text. Both sections or parts of the text preach repentance. In the case of the Galileans who were executed by the authority of Pilate, Jesus does not pass judgement, nor does he attribute the death of those killed by a falling tower to their own fault. Many of the people probably looked upon the victims in both instances as guilty of some sin, and so punished by God. But Jesus does not say this is the case, rather he reminds the people that they could all suffer a like fate, if they do not reform their lives. And Jesus is speaking not so much of physical death, but consequences in the life hereafter.

The parable of the barren fig tree, while it, too, preaches repentance or reform, also contains an optimistic note. Jesus is confident that ultimately his ministry will be accepted, and so the vine-dresser advises patience with the tree and special care for it. This is symbolic of God's mercy. Only if this fails will it be abandoned.

Sincerity of effort and repentance are topics for the homilist on today's gospel text.

THIRD WEEK IN LENT

Optional Mass

1st reading: Exodus 17: 1-7

The story of Moses striking the rock to obtain water is one we all remember. The people complained because they lacked sufficient water. Their complaints were directed against Moses and against God. In answer to Moses' appeal for help, God tells him to strike a rock with his staff. Moses obeys, and water came forth.

This incident shows the providential concern of God for his people, and that in the face of a repeated lack of trust and faith on their part. This intervention on the part of God occurs again and again in the years of wandering in the desert on their way to the promised land. God never tired of coming to their aid. This should convince us that God will aid us, too, in time of need.

Gospel: John 4: 5-42

Christ as the source of life is the truth presented in this gospel incident. Jesus' first remarks to the woman at the well are not understood by her. She attempts to be ironic in her reply, asking Jesus if He is greater than Jacob. The Christian reader knows that He is.

Jesus is really offering to give Himself to the woman. She saw just the man, a Jew. "Living water" is a term used in several places in the Old Testament. It signifies divine vitality or life, revelation, wisdom. This is what Jesus offers.

The woman still misunderstanding asks for this marvelous water. And only when Christ replies again does she recognize that He is a prophet. Jesus replies again at length and directly tells her that He is the Messiah.

The gospel does not indicate satisfactorily the woman's reaction to this revelation, but she does rush off to report to the people in her village her encounter with Jesus, and their curiosity brings them out to the well to meet him.

In the remarks of Jesus that follow, addressed to the villagers and to his disciples, He sums up the purpose of His coming among us—to do His Father's will. And the people accept Him.

This story impresses on us the faith reaction of people who were really hungering for truth. They longed for the Messiah, as did the people of Judea. Something is to be said in praise of the simplicity of these people; they were open to truth, as St. Luke so often indicates in his gospel. St. John is concerned with this virtue, too. These simple people were impressed by the report of the woman, but even more so after they had met and heard Jesus.

MONDAY OF THE THIRD WEEK IN LENT

1st reading: II Kings 5: 1-15a

When Naaman the Syrian came to Israel to seek a cure for his illness, the king suspected some kind of plot. Elisha's aloof attitude in that he did not come out to meet Naaman personally may be explained as a testing of the faith of Naaman. Or we may take it or see it as Elisha standing on his pride since Naaman would not enter his house.

Naaman felt insulted by what he was told to do to effect his cure, but was persuaded by his servants to follow the prophets advice.

Upon being cured he expresses his faith in the God of the Israelites. In the New Testament this story is used to prefigure the call of the nations to the messianic kingdom.

Gospel: Luke 4: 24-30

The announcement of Jesus that the messianic age had come was at first received with great excitement, but then doubts began to set in as the people saw Jesus as only the son of Joseph, and they had difficulty in seeing anyone greater in Him. In other words, the novelty of Jesus wore off rather quickly it seems, and St. Luke is probably correct in placing the rejection of Jesus by his own townpeople right at the beginning of His ministry. It gives perspective to the pattern of the rest of his public ministry. The people needed to be convinced.

When Christ suggested by means of His references to Elijah and Elisha that His ministry would eventually include all peoples, the Jews reacted violently. Luke points out, yet again, the narrow mindedness of the Jews' notion of God as someone exclusively theirs.

St. Luke in showing the rejection of Jesus by His own people sets the stage for highlighting His enthusiastic reception by outsiders.

We are reminded of the enthusiasm we should show in our witnessing to Christ in our daily lives. A gloomy christian is a contradiction.

TUESDAY OF THE THIRD WEEK IN LENT

1st reading: Daniel 3: 25, 34-43

Our first reading is part of the prayer of the three youths in the fiery furnace. It is a lamentation, and is really the prayer of the community, represented by the three youths. The community is being persecuted. Historically this dates to about the year 165 BC.

It begins with the community confessing their sins which have brought about the punishments they are now undergoing. They appeal to God to remember His covenant with their ancestors and His promise to deliver Israel from sufferings and make them a great nation.

They tell God that their present condition in no way measures up to those promises, and they ask God to accept their sufferings in place of the sacrifices in the temple.

The reading concludes with their promise to do God's will and a final request for deliverance from suffering.

Gospel: Matthew 18: 21-35

The 18th chapter of St. Matthew's gospel deals with the relationships between members of the Church. The specific question in today's gospel reading is the forgiveness of personal sins.

The passage has Peter asking Christ if there is some definite number of times at which forgiveness can end because the offense continues. The answer of Christ in which the symbolic number "seven" is used, means that there is no limit on charity; there is no limit to the number of times that one can forgive.

The parable which follows reinforces the idea of forgiveness by giving a motivation for it. If God's mercy toward us has been so great, then we ought to forgive others whose offenses against us are insignificant in comparison with our offenses against God.

And we cannot expect or should not expect forgiveness from God if we do not forgive one another.

WEDNESDAY OF THE THIRD WEEK IN LENT

1st reading: Deuteronomy 4: 1, 5-9

Moses exhorts the people to keep the law. His words are a plea for Israel to respond to the saving acts of God by giving Him their allegiance and love through observance of the law.

There are two reasons given why Israel should keep the law: 1) the law is a source of life, the way to life with God. If they keep it they will live; 2) the law is of divine origin and a source of wisdom. It gives the ability to recognize the true values of life. The law is, therefore, not a burden, but another expression of God's love for Israel.

There is an implied lesson for us in this exhortation of Moses. Law makes for good order under which life flourishes. Good law properly understood and appreciated is a principle of freedom.

Laws should reflect wisdom; Divine laws reflect divine wisdom; human laws should reflect human wisdom. Our presumption regarding a law should be that if the law exists, it must come from experience. Experience should dictate the necessity of a law. If, upon the reflection of wise men and prudent men, a law no longer serves a good purpose, then it should be abrogated. But simply to challenge a law because it comes from one other than ourselves is not a mark of a wise man. And remember, too, wisdom is the perfection of charity.

Gospel: Matthew 5: 17-19

This short gospel text contains a very direct lesson: good works are not merely the external observance of the letter of the law.

The reading is related to the plea or exhortation of Moses to the people to obey the law. Moses meant the precepts or commandments. Christ would have us go a step further and try to understand the spirit of the law which is founded in the love of God and love of our fellow men — all men.

This is what Christ meant by saying that he came to perfect the law, to deepen our understanding of it, to enable us to see divine law, especially, as a means to salvation.

With this attitude toward law Christ could very adequately sum up the law in two principles: love of God and love of neighbor as oneself.

THURSDAY OF THE THIRD WEEK IN LENT

1st reading: Jeremiah 7: 23-28

Jeremias again castigates the people for placing the emphasis in their worship of God on external practices, while ignoring the essential demand for a genuine attitude of obedience to the law of the covenant. He was accusing the people of hypocrisy.

His words are a reminder that God has constantly sent his prophets to warn them on this matter, but the people didn't listen. They remained obstinate. They refused to listen to Jeremias, too.

Placed in the context of salvation history, we are given a prophetic review of what kind of reception the preaching of Christ will receive from some people — indifference, complacency and a lack of genuine faith.

Gospel: Luke 11: 14-23

The obstinacy of the Pharisees is illustrated in this text. They object to the goodness of Christ and accuse him of casting out devils with the power of the devil. Christ very directly and logically turns on them and points out their stupidity in making such an accusation. He asks why the devil would want to work against himself.

The indifference, complacency and lack of faith of the Pharisees—the very charges which Jeremias brought against the people of his day—are the precise charges Christ throws at them.

Christ tells them that they are refusing to recognize the signs of the kingdom of God which is now operating in their midst. Luke gives us the impression that Christ had to be harsh with them. Perhaps Luke paints the Pharisees in worse light than they really were, but to a purpose. He wants to emphasize to the non-Jews for whom he was specifically writing that since Christ was rejected by His own people, He now belongs to all men.

Christ was telling the Pharisees that they had better choose a side: God (represented by Himself) or the devil.

FRIDAY OF THE THIRD WEEK IN LENT

1st reading Osee 14: 2-10

The concluding verses of the prophet Osee's book offer a message of hope, as he points out what can happen to Israel if she turns to God.

The externals of religion must be accompanied by true repentance. This is what will give their sacrifices value.

A sample of what they should say follows: Israel should admit her guilt, and reject the idols which are an insult to God.

God's answer then comes through the prophet: He will heal them out of His love which He freely gives, and He will grant them all they need.

To us the reading represents an exhortation to true devotion which springs from interior convictions and faith. It speaks to us, too, of the goodness of God.

Gospel: Mark 12: 28b-34

There is something unique about today's gospel. The incident reports a friendly discussion. Its purpose is to show the orthodoxy of Jesus and His followers and their faithfulness to the law.

The rabbis argued about which was the greatest commandment of the law, and the one from which all of their laws could be deduced. Jesus enters the discussion and points to the love of God and neighbor. The rabbis expected that He would say the love of God, but Christ extends the formula they were familiar with and combines it with love of neighbor. By so doing He wants to indicate that the one follows from the other, and that if one fails in one, observance of the other is impossible.

A friendly scribe agrees with Him, and even commends Him for His reply. Christ, in order not to be outdone, tells the scribe that he is not far from the kingdom of God.

A note of possible interest to you: the rabbis at Christ's time had determined that there were more than 600 distinct commandments in the law, and they rated them by degrees of great or small concern. But the letter of the law had become an obsession for some of them. They had lost the spirit of the law which was to promote love of God and a genuine love of one another. Externals

became the important thing, and consequently faith suffered.

Christ's answer was to emphasize the real purpose behind the law. He is really preaching a freedom that allows us to show a greater love of God and neighbor. He places the responsibility on us. And the recent changes in the law of the Church do this in doing away with the many small rules and obligations that we had, such as fasting laws, and some ritual laws.

Law is to promote order and love, and our freedom is enhanced by the responsibility and initiative that we take in loving God and others. That mature responsibility will dictate to us that we must have order in our lives, and so laws will be seen as coming from a wisdom based on charity. A popular song of the day puts the lesson this way: "What the world needs now is love, sweet love. That's the only thing that there's just too little of." St. John put it in these words: "Little Children love one another." And when asked if he had any other message to give, he replied: "If only this is done, it is enough."

SATURDAY OF THE THIRD WEEK IN LENT

1st reading: Osee 6: 1-6

Israel suffered because of her sins, and after realizing the futility of alliances with other nations, she returned to God. But God did not accept the Israelites back so readily, because they were motivated not by love, but simply by a desire to escape affliction and difficulties.

Their repentance was only external—only for show, and they thought the acts of ritual sacrifice would suffice. But God wanted more. He wanted a service of the heart.

This is the message of his prophet: without love and submission to the will of God, ritual sacrifices count for nothing.

Gospel: Luke 18: 9-14

The point of the parable of the publican and the Pharisee is the nature of true prayer. First there is an example of what prayer should not be. Prayer is not a catalogue of our accomplishments, which is what the Pharisee made the contents of his communication with God. He was proud because of his observance of the externals of the law, and contemptuous of anyone who failed to live up to minute meaningless precepts. Being completely confident of his own righteousness, he asks of God nothing, and receives nothing.

The tax collector, on the other hand, simply admits his failings; he admits his need for God and places his trust in Him. This is precisely what the prophets preached to the people throughout the centuries of waiting for the Messiah. And when the peoples' dispositions were such as those of the tax collector, God intervened on their behalf.

Because of the man's humble attitude God has mercy on this man, and he goes away having experienced the mercy and forgiveness of God.

Our prayer should be marked by simplicity, humility, and true confidence and trust in God's mercy.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT - Cycle A

1st reading: I Samuel 16: 1, 6-7, 10-13

Our first reading is the account of the way David was identified by Samuel and anointed king of Israel. It is a simplified account, because its purpose is to impart theological knowledge rather than factual information.

The author's purpose is to show that God took the initiative to replace Saul by the house of David. The author sees David and his successors as the true and authorized representatives of God. The author also looks to the future, because this divine election explains the eternal and universal spiritual kingdom which will be the possession of a future prince of the house of David.

David is described in our reading as God's anointed one—the Messias or the Christ. . These were the titles later applied to Jesus of Nazareth by the early christians. The title *Christ* was used so frequently by them that they eventually became known as Christians.

The title "Messias" received much more emphasis in the New Testament than in the Old. Jesus did not allow his friends to acclaim him as the Messias, but He did allow them to refer to him as Son of David during his triumphal entry into Jerusalem shortly before his passion and death.

Our reading also shows David as possessed of the Spirit of God, i.e. of a special gift of God which makes it possible to achieve results in God's plan of salvation which would be impossible for un-aided human nature.

The early christians were conscious of a Spirit of God at work among them, and soon came to realize that there is in God a divine person described as the Spirit who shares in the divine nature as fully as do the Father and the Son.

The responsorial psalm reminds us that God is our true shepherd. He will give us all the graces we need.

2nd reading: Ephesians 5: 8-14

St. Paul in this reading uses the contrast between light and darkness to express the contrast which exists between human nature without Christ (darkness) and human nature which has received the impression of God's Holy Spirit with a view to the day of redemption (light).

Our passage begins with the statement: You are now light in

Christ, and Paul clarifies what he means by adding: You must walk as becomes children of light. What Paul is stating here is that the christian must adopt a certain style of life—a life that is appropriate for one who has received the grace of Christ. He sketches what that style is in general terms — as he always does in his moral preaching, or most often anyway. The life of the pagan—the man without grace, or the man in darkness, — he contrasts this to the life of the christian—the man in the light, or the man who has the grace of Christ. Living in the light means to live in the grace of God thru Christ.

It was one of the constant arguments of the early Christian apologists to show how different the christians were from others in their moral behavior. Their moral goodness was attributed to their conviction that God demanded this of them, and supported his demands with special help.

There is a beautiful passage in an apology, THE LETTER TO DIOGNETUS, which is worth reading: (chapters 5 & 6).

Paul introduces an additional metaphor taken from farming or gardening. He tells the Ephesians that they must produce a crop of actions such as one would expect from a christian. He summarizes these fruits as “goodness and justice and truth,” a very interesting biblical progression.

Goodness, we can understand as the virtue by which a man is true to himself, always acting in a way which human nature seems to demand of us. A natural goodness. This is not a specifically christian goodness. All of us know individuals who are not christians, whom we refer to as naturally good persons.

Justice — this is a step further. It is the virtue by which we treat our fellow-men exactly as they should be treated.

Truth — seems to indicate complete honesty and sincerity in all of our decisions.

There is one obvious omission in Paul’s text — LOVE, which in a sense is the very centre of Paul’s moral teaching. We might conclude, though, that Paul implied it and that the christian at Ephesus understood that goodness, justice and truth—these virtues were to be practiced or lived out of love for God, since they were supported by his grace, and his love.

Paul’s text concludes with a citation of an ancient baptismal liturgy text, which celebrates the passage from darkness to light, from death to life: “Awake, O sleeper, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light.”

Gospel: John 9: 1-41

The miracle described in this reading illustrates our Lord's compassion and power, but it also suggests that his mission is to impart religious insight to those who are spiritually blind. A point which is frequently made in St. John's Gospel, and explicitly stated in the sixth verse of this 9th chapter: "I am the light of the world."

The narrative is easy to follow. The miracle itself made a deep impression on those who witnessed it, and raised the question whether the person who performed it might not be a prophet sent by God. I think the miracle itself was an invitation to faith. And towards the end of the chapter, the man born blind himself makes his personal profession of faith, in reply to Christ's question: DO YOU BELIEVE IN THE SON OF MAN. . . . his reply: WHO IS HE THAT I MAY BELIEVE. . . . and when Christ tells him He is the one the man says: I DO BELIEVE, LORD.

The pharisees withheld this faith—and they are symbolic of all men of narrow mind, of all skeptics of all time, the pharisees withheld it because they were spiritually blind. They had seen the physical cure, and could not have doubted the change in the man. Why they withheld faith we are not told, but St. John in the prologue of His gospel said there would be those who would not believe—"the light shone in the darkness and the darkness did not receive it." Some men would not accept the gift of faith—then as now.

Jesus Christ confronted them — "You see, and yet remain faithless," and this Christ says is a sin. "Your sin remains," he said to the pharisees. And to cover up their sin, they call into question the goodness of Jesus. The miracle was attested to by the blind man, and his parents. But the pharisees tried to avoid the conclusion that a miracle had taken place with a specious theological argument — God will not choose a sinner to be his spokesman and representative. Thus they accused Christ of being a sinner because he had violated the sabbath law of rest.

Christ's reply is that charity sometimes takes precedence over the cultic law of the Sabbath. Jesus Christ was preaching an openness to grace to the Pharisees, and they refused it. And there are modern day counterparts of the pharisees, close-minded individuals who refuse to see divine activity in the world, who refuse

to admit even the possibility of divine influence in the life of man. Or perhaps, and this may be even a greater sin — they are indifferent to divine grace.

People have various ways to rationalize a lack of faith or indifference to grace. The Pharisees used (or mis-used) religious authority. In their pride they set themselves up as judges—WE ARE THE ONES WHO WILL JUDGE WHETHER A MAN IS SENT BY GOD. Modern man says: I WILL JUDGE WHETHER THIS IS ALRIGHT FOR ME. And generally his only reason is that *he* wants to do it or refuses to do something. It is the same kind of intellectual pride and lack of faith of which the pharisees were guilty.

There are overtones of this in today's attitude toward moral teaching. Many refuse to accept any objective standards, and refuse to recognize any authoritative teaching body, such as the Church—the pope and the bishops acting as spiritual guides and teachers. Man, in so doing, sets himself up in opposition to Jesus Christ, he refuses to be open to grace—to the light of grace, and so chooses to remain in the dark, and rely on his own resources.

To sort of tie together our readings for today—in the first reading from the I Book of Samuel, the Lord seeks a man of openness who would become a model and a leader for others. God chooses David, and through him he overcomes the evil that had fallen on the people because of the sin of Saul. David chose to follow the precepts of God. He was a man of good heart, open to the grace of God. He failed, more than once, but he had the humility to admit it and rise above it.

This same motif appears in our second reading from Ephesians. To be a model demands obedience and faithfulness to God's grace. And all christians are to be such models, and distinguish themselves in this way from unbelievers. God has chosen us at Baptism, and sets us in opposition to sin.

The Gospel draws all these elements together. The blind man is a hearer of good heart, a seeker of truth. He is chosen by the free act of God — God first offers grace. The blind man accepts it, and now professes his faith in front of, or (and despite) un-believers. He had the courage of his convictions.

We have to have the same courage. We have been chosen by God to be among his people (we religious have accepted a further call to a special life of service), and God gives the grace we need to carry out or live out our calling and vocation. We have to live that

life with courage, and profess our faith to a world that may be hostile, is often indifferent. And we must be willing, if circumstances demand, to give up all for the sake of, or love of God. We can and we will if our faith and trust is marked by openness to the grace of Christ. We may from time to time fail—that is only human, and even to be expected—but God will always be there with his grace when, and to the extent that we need it to be HIS people—the people of light—illuminated by faith and love.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT - Cycle B

1st reading: II Chronicles 36: 14-17, 19-23

Our first reading begins with a reason given the people for their present exile in Babylon in the 6th century B.C. The people had been unfaithful to the covenant repeatedly, as the text indicates, they “added infidelity to infidelity.” The preaching of the prophets was ignored, and the prophets themselves ridiculed. The result was catastrophic: destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, and great loss of life at the hands of the Chaldeans (Babylonians). Exile was the lot of those who survived.

The release of the people was brought about when Cyrus, king of Persia, defeated the Chaldeans. He allowed the Jews to return to their homeland, and decreed the rebuilding of the temple and city of Jerusalem.

The reading shows God intervening again on behalf of His people, and thus restoring the hope and confidence they had in Him. The final sentence of this reading looks to the future with hope.

The responsorial psalm speaks of the grief and sorrow of the people in exile; there is longing for a return to their homeland, of which they are ever mindful. In eschatological perspective, this prayer in the mouth of the christian is a longing for heaven.

2nd reading: Ephesians 2: 4-10

The letter to the Ephesians contains some of Paul’s most poetic language. Beauty of expression abounds throughout the letter, and today’s passage which extols the goodness of God is a very good illustration. The entire letter is an enthusiastic exhortation to gratitude for God’s gift to man — Jesus as mediator.

The utter gratuity of God is pointed out in today’s passage. We

are the beneficiaries of undeserved grace. Paul's doctrine of justification is contained in this passage, too. Salvation is through faith, but this must be accompanied by good deeds.

Gospel: John 3: 14-21

John the theologian is at work again in this passage. The passage contains a statement of basic beliefs about Jesus Christ as the one who gives eternal life; salvation is through faith in Him. What we have here is probably a sermon by St. John — John summarizing the teaching of Christ.

Today's passage centers on the glorification of Jesus by His Father. The language is reminiscent of some statements found in St. John's Prologue, in which Christ is the Light. Salvation for man depends on accepting Christ and living in His light.

This passage speaks, as do the other readings for today, about the gratuitous love of God for the world (mankind). The epitome of that love is expressed in John's words from today's gospel: "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son. . ."

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT - Cycle C

1st reading: Joshua 5: 9-12

The slavery of the Israelites is now ended, the completion of the long journey from Egypt to promised land is imminent. The people were encamped around the city of Jericho, and they celebrated the Passover. From that point on the people utilized the land given them by God, who no longer had to provide food (manna) for them. These days were days of joy for the people. And this spirit is captured in the responsorial psalm (ps. 34), a hymn of thanksgiving. The people now possessed the land God had promised, and they enjoyed its fruits.

2nd reading: II Corinthians 5: 17-21

Jesus Christ's redemptive acts radically change those who accept Him as the Messiah. The Christian is a new creature (the new creation of the prophetic literature). A great reconciliation has been effected between God and man by the ministry of Christ, a ministry of reconciliation. Paul sees the Christian as sharing in this. The apostle (and all Christians are apostles) is a special legate of Christ, prolonging and extending this ministry of reconciliation.

The concluding sentences are an exhortation to allow the effects of Christ's redemptive activity to always affect us.

Gospel: Luke 15: 1-3, 11-12

Traditionally the liturgical accent of this 4th Sun. of Lent has been on the joy anticipatory of Easter — a respite from the sorrow and penance of Lent. Today's readings maintain that tradition. We are reminded in the first reading that the Easter event is a Pass-over—a passing from the land of the slavery of sinful Egypt to the Promised land of salvation. And Paul depicts justification as a passage from the old ways of sin to life in the Father.

With this as background, the parable of the prodigal son is most appropriate today. It is one of three responses that Christ makes in Luke's gospel to the Pharisaical criticism: "He eats with sinners." Here more than in the other two (the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost drachma) Christ directly answers the charge.

Genuine love is the emphatic lesson of the parable. It was Christ's answer to the affected scandal taken by the Pharisees because Christ associated with people who needed him—sinners and the poor.

The emphasis in the parable is on the loving Father. And the point of the story is God's great happiness over the return of the sinner and the incredible mercy he is ready to show. And I think this second lesson is the more important—because it explains the very way that God dealt with Israel throughout the Old Testament, and if anyone should be aware of this, the Pharisees—the teachers of the people—should have been. And they should get the point of the story.

But they didn't. The Pharisees could not be understanding of one who violated one of their almost impossible precepts. The parable chides them for this, using the elder son who is unforgiving as representative of their self-righteousness. They are behaving like the brother who balks at welcoming back the prodigal with their father's enthusiasm. The overwhelming inclination to mercy and forgiveness on the part of the father (and, of course, God) must be shared by everyone.

The gentleness of the Father is a reminder to them to genuinely forgive and be understanding of the weaknesses of people. It is an exhortation to genuine brotherly love and understanding. It is an exhortation to kindness, which in its christian meaning is quite the virtue.

It has the wide connotation of tenderness and compassion, of

liberality and openness to others. The kind person is amiable. Christ was preaching amiability to his hearers.

The amiable person, I described on another occasion, a few Sundays ago, as the one who never takes offense. One cannot insult or injure the amiable individual, because he or she will pass it off or excuse it with an "Oh, he didn't mean it," or "he isn't feeling well, today." The amiable person always tries to see things in the best light, always looks for the good. Even the slightest good will be magnified by such a person. It is a trait that a religious must particularly foster, and it must be first extended to our immediate community. If we are amiable here, we will be so elsewhere and with all others. If we are grouchy and complaining here, and put on a front of virtue elsewhere, then we are hardly what Christ wants us to be.

Probably we don't match either description—we don't match either son in the parable, nor the father. — but we are a bit like all of them. We condemn faults in others, while we are guilty of some imperfections ourselves—probably the very ones we see in others. We have no difficulty excusing ourselves. So the least we can do is act in the same way toward others — and with the same qualities of love and mercy as the father in the parable, who is so strikingly a figure of God.

If we are desirous of imitating the perfection or the holiness of God, then we must make efforts along these lines — efforts to overlook the faults of others, while being conscious of our own. And we must direct our major effort at truly loving others with kindness — tenderness, sympathy, openness, amiability.

It is so easy to be self-righteous; so difficult to refrain from even mildly rebuking others.

True christian love which we reflect on so often in the lenten readings in our liturgy, and by the way, which the liturgy is all about—the brotherly love of Christ for us—is summed up in the golden rule: DO UNTO OTHERS AS YOU WOULD HAVE THEM DO TO YOU.

FOURTH WEEK IN LENT

Optional Mass

1st reading: Micah 7: 7-9

This prophecy dates to the end of the 8th century B.C. The verses which precede it are rather pessimistic in tone, as the prophet denounces the iniquity of the people—their covetousness, violence and lack of trust. In this morning's verses he places his trust in God, and the triumphalistic tone is in marked contrast to the first six verses of the chapter.

The faith of the prophet is based on the fidelity of God to his promises, and the dominant theme is the mercy of God in the verses that follow.

Gospel: John 9: 1-41

St. John's sense of drama is shown in this incident of the cure of the man born blind, and his sort of trial before the Pharisees.

Jesus is presented as the light of the world—he gives sight (light). The man is cured, and when he is called upon to give an accounting for his cure, his convictions about who Jesus really is become increasingly and progressively more precise: "the man called Jesus," "a prophet", one who is "from God." And finally in reply to Jesus who asks if he believes in the "Son of Man," he calls Jesus "LORD."

The progressive growth in faith of the man born blind is contrasted to the progressive blindness and hard heartedness of the Pharisees, who ultimately deny the miracle of the cure. Their smug complacency made them hopeless. They didn't want to be enlightened, but preferred to remain blind or in the dark rather than give some recognition to Jesus.

Faith demands an openness to God and His grace. It lightens the burden of trials and difficulties. The man of faith can only be optimistic. He will be unafraid to stand up for his belief, if and when confronted about it. The result will be a progressive strengthening of that faith, as with the man born blind. God will become more and more a real influence in the life of a man of strong faith. This is one lesson that we may draw from this gospel incident.

MONDAY OF THE FOURTH WEEK IN LENT

1st reading: Isaias 65: 17-21

The verses of today's first reading are eschatological. Here the prophet announces in detail the salvation to come to God's servants. It will be a miraculous transformation of the world—all the universe will share in man's salvation.

All the troubles and sorrow of the past will be forgotten, because now joy will envelop everyone. The people will rejoice in their salvation, and God will rejoice in what He has done.

The reading is just part of a long description which is an attempt to make the people long for life with God.

Injected into this Lenten season it holds out a note of hope for us as we prepare to celebrate the central mysteries of our faith.

Gospel: John 4: 43-54

The problem of faith is taken up again, and St. John points out the shallowness of the faith of the Galileans. They were impressed by Christ's wonderful works, but there was no in-depth faith.

John tries to show through the example of the royal official the type of faith that the Galileans should have as a result of the signs Jesus gave them.

At first the faith of the official is that of the Galileans—a belief that Jesus can work miracles. Jesus rejects this kind of faith. But the man persists and believes the words of Jesus, and when he hears that his son has been healed and is living, he and his entire household come to full faith in Jesus as a giver of life.

I would like to draw just one short lesson from this gospel text. It is faith which activates the charity of our lives. The virtue of faith, the acceptance of Christ as God and the doctrine he preached and preaches now through His Church is very real to many, and it should be so to us. We may not feel a dependence on it at the present time, but there are times and incidents in our lives when faith will be the saving virtue. By reflection we must learn to see God working in small things and should something difficult be asked of us, faith and charity will sustain us.

TUESDAY OF THE FOURTH WEEK IN LENT

1st reading: Ezekiel 47: 1-9, 12

The latter part of the Book of Ezekiel is a picture of the people after the exile had ended, and a description of their relationship to God at that time. The prophet tries to make the people conscious of the presence of God among them.

In today's reading water is used as a symbol of an abundance of earthly and spiritual blessings, and as a symbol of life. So hopeful is the prophet that he even visualizes the Dead Sea, which is a stagnant sea in the text, as becoming a fresh water lake, and abounding with fish, in the midst of a prosperous land.

Since the Jews never realized their full potential because of their infidelity to God, we can, perhaps, see the passage as referring to our future life with God. Eternity with Him will be filled with blessings for us.

Gospel: John 5: 1-3a, 5-16

Jesus reveals Himself as the one who gives life. In the gospel of St. John the miracles of restoring physical life, health and sight, are gifts which symbolize the eternal life which Christ communicates to man. However the stress in the story is that Jesus does this on the Sabbath.

And on purpose. On the Sabbath the people are to do nothing according to the current interpretation of law. So Christ by acting on the Sabbath makes it clear that it is He who takes the initiative throughout, and nothing is required of the man. He is only asked if he wished to be healed.

The authorities aren't interested in the miracle; all they saw was the violation of the Sabbath. John, like Matthew and Luke, points out the spiritual blindness of the religious leaders.

Jesus's final remark to the man when he later meets him in the temple is a warning against a worse thing that could happen to him—the judgement of God, unless his cure brings about a true conversion.

The homilist could take this occasion to point out the meaning of conversion, and the need that all have of it. All of us can be better than we are, more virtuous than we are at present. Conversion is an ongoing process.

WEDNESDAY OF THE FOURTH WEEK IN LENT

1st reading: Isaiah 49: 8-15

Israel is in exile, and the prophet proclaims to them that God will deliver them on the day that He chooses, and will bring them back to the land that He gave them. It will be a new exodus during which God will lead them as a shepherd. God will protect them and take care of their needs as He did before.

The prophet's intent is to point out to the people the goodness of God on their behalf.

The last part of the reading is a hymn of praise—the people's response to God's mercy and His saving activity. All creation is to join in this hymn of thanksgiving.

Israel had been despondent, thinking that God had forgot them, but the prophet again reassures them that there are no limits to God's love, and uses the love of a mother for her child as an example of God's love for them.

Gospel: John 5: 17-30

Today's gospel takes up where we left off yesterday. Christ defends his curing on the Sabbath, and gets the rabbis to admit that God could not rest on the Sabbath. If He did, the world would cease to exist. Christ then says that since the Father does not rest on the Sabbath, neither does the Son.

They understood the implications of this—Jesus was making Himself the equal of God, and that, of course, they couldn't accept. But Christ continues, and tells them that there are two things greater than the miracles they witnessed, and these things He can do: 1) He can give spiritual life to those who are dead in sin; and, 2) He can judge men—giving life or condemnation depending on whether they accept Him or reject Him.

St. John progressively makes it more and more clear that Jesus is the Son of God. One can almost get the impression from John's gospel that Jesus deliberately provoked the religious leaders so that He would have the opportunity to tell them that He is God, hoping eventually to convince them.

This reading is an invitation to us to renew our faith in Christ as the giver of new life.

THURSDAY OF THE FOURTH WEEK IN LENT

1st reading: Exodus 32: 7-14

The power of intercessory prayer is one lesson that we can draw from today's first reading. God condemns the idolatry of the people, and wants to punish them. He makes this known to Moses. The anger of God is expressed by calling the people "this people" or "your people" when He speaks to Moses. In other places God usually speaks of them as "my people."

However Moses intercedes and persuades God to retract His decision, and speaking from a human point of view, Moses cleverly appeals to the reputation of God — what would the Egyptians think, if He did not honor his promise to Abraham.

This whole incident in the account of the Exodus points out the inconstancy of man. We must constantly be reminded of our duties toward God, and we must pray for the grace of fidelity. These are the implications of the story.

Gospel: John 5: 31-47

Jesus accepts the legal principle that a man cannot be his own witness. So He calls his witnesses. First there is John the Baptist—the Jews admitted that he was a prophet, that he was from God, and that he had witnessed to Jesus. Secondly, there were the miracles of Jesus—these show that He is from God, because only God could have given such power. Thirdly, the Father Himself—and here Christ indicts the Pharisees and religious leaders—the Father speaks from within those who believe. Since they have never believed, they have never heard this interior testimony. Lastly there are the scriptures—these come from God and point to the Christ.

Still the Jews refuse to believe, and the basis for their unbelief is their refusal to dedicate themselves to God, their refusal to love Him, and seek His glory. The accusation is implicit—they are concerned with their personal glory here and now. They looked for the acclamation and approval of men, and their worship of God was only a lip service.

Implicitly the lesson of the Gospel is that we should not be like the indifferent Pharisees. We should accept the witnesses whom Christ brings forth, and, in what we do, and how we live, we should be concerned for the glory of God, the love of God, and not live and work for selfish motives.

FRIDAY OF THE FOURTH WEEK IN LENT

1st reading: Wisdom 2: 1a, 12-22

God made man to be immortal. But spiritual death is possible, and is the result of evil which causes eternal separation from God.

A wicked man's outlook on life is presented by means of a speech. He denies any existence after death, and resolves to seek after his own pleasure in this life, and to make strength the norm of justice. This precedes our text for this morning.

Since the life and words of the just man are a reproach to the wicked, the wicked man persecutes him and tests his belief that God will defend and take care of him in time of trouble. It is this which makes up our reading, together with a resolution to the problem.

A judgement on the wicked follows. The wicked are wrong in thinking that death has always been the inescapable fate of man. Because of wickedness the evil man gave no credence to the truth that God made man to be immortal and that death comes only through sin.

The reading is an instruction and an exhortation to virtue by which we come to share eternal life with Christ. The lack of virtue brings damnation or loss of God.

Gospel: John 7: 1-2, 10, 25-30

The unpopularity of Jesus with the leaders of the people is the topic of today's gospel. They knew Jesus was from Nazareth, and so He couldn't be the Messias. They believed that they would not know the place of origin of the Messias.

Christ replied to them by saying that their knowledge was superficial and they were unable to recognize His real origin—from the Father, because they did not know God. If they really did know Him, as they claimed they did, then they would accept His testimony.

Christ again rebuked them by replying this way, and doing it in public only made them react all the more angrily. But their attempt to arrest Him failed.

We must remember that St. John wrote some sixty years after Christ's death and resurrection. John was still hoping to convince the unbelievers among the Jewish people that Christ was truly God.

Placed in our Lenten liturgy, and appropriately in the latter half, it is a reminder to us to revitalize our faith in Christ.

SATURDAY OF THE FOURTH WEEK IN LENT

1st reading: Jeremiah 11: 18-20

This short reading is part of Jeremiah's confession. He tells us of his trials and sufferings, and his rejection by the people, even by his fellow townsmen.

They sought to kill him, but God intervened and informed him of the plot. Like a good Semite, Jeremiah now places his cause before the Lord and asks for vengeance.

The place of this text in our Lenten liturgy is just a reminder of the similar experience of Jesus Christ, though Christ did not ask for vengeance. Jeremiah is a type of Christ, the suffering servant.

Gospel: John 7: 40-53

John continues his apologetical lesson. Today's text shows us that the Pharisees are upset because so many of the people are following Jesus, and they are further upset by their failure to arrest Him. They are sure, however, that none of their party has believed in Him.

But Nicodemus has believed, and now comes to the defense of Jesus, insisting on a point of law. He is sarcastically dismissed, for everyone knows, they said, that the Messiah cannot come from Galilee.

The spiritual blindness of the religious leaders is pointed out. It is a reminder to us to be open to the graces of faith, and to live our lives accordingly. The example of Nicodemus should inspire us to always stand up for our convictions. This may at times require a great deal of courage and heroic virtue.

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT - Cycle A

1st reading: Ezechiel 37: 12-14

Ezechiel addressed himself to a people in exile. They were discouraged, and felt that there was no significant destiny in store for them in spite of God's promises. The prophet holds out new hope to them. He assures the people that the Spirit of God will dwell in them. His comforting words are meant to be also as assurance of forgiveness for their infidelity.

This reading is followed by Psalm 129 - the *De profundis* - a cry for forgiveness and mercy.

2nd reading: Romans 8: 8-11

Our second reading is a natural follow-up of the first. St. Paul here proclaims the power of the life-giving Spirit of God. It is through this indwelling of the Spirit, which begins at Baptism, that we are saved. Where the Spirit *is*, *there* is life.

The final verse - verse 11 - is one of the strongest of St. Paul's expressions of christian hope. The Spirit dwelling in us leads us to life. This is the same Spirit who dwelt in Christ who was raised from the dead. God assigns therefore to us the very same destiny — to rise from the dead to life in HIM.

Paul's words here give a christian dimension to the words of the prophet Ezechiel which made up our first reading.

Gospel: John 11: 1-45

By the account of the raising of Lazarus St. John intended to emphasize and illustrate Christ's statement: I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE; and to indicate that faith in him is a necessary condition to achieve a sharing in this life—divine life in union with God.

Placed at this point in the Lenten liturgy, we are being prepared to profess our belief in Christ as the source of life, as our cause of being raised to life in God.

St. John was writing to a christian community, and his purpose was to present various aspects of Christ's role as the way to the Father. In this reading on the raising of Lazarus we meet with varied reactions, unbelief and hostility from the enemies of Christ; others confronted by the miracle now believe; others still are strengthened in their belief—the apostles, Martha, Mary.

Special attention is given to these latter by Christ. He will con-

vince them that HE is the source of life—the life which will be theirs in eternity. Secondly Christ impresses on them (and us) that this is the purpose for which He came into this world — to make man more conscious of God. And finally to show that His claim to be the source of eternal life is neither far-fetching nor fantastic, he brings a dead man back to life.

This Gospel passage is an invitation to us to believe. It is a kind of Easter Gospel, a prelude to Christ's own victory over death, and a pledge of our own resurrection. It is a passage that should fill us with hope. And our faith and hope together should convince us of the necessity to live our lives in and with the charity that is characteristic of the follower of Christ. It is a demanding charity, but a rewarding one which leads to life with and in God.

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT - Cycle B

1st reading: Jeremiah 31: 31-34

Jeremiah addresses the people in exile in Babylon. He speaks God's words of hope and consolation, which met a precise need of the people who were very despondent.

This passage is one of the greatest and most significant of Old Testament prophecies. It is remarkable for the brevity of the summary of God's dealings with His people, and it now looks to the future. The old covenant failed because of the infidelity of the people; God now promises a new covenant.

Spoken to the people during the Babylonian captivity, the immediate fulfillment would be the restoration of Jerusalem and the Temple. The perfect fulfillment is, of course, in the coming of Christ and the establishment of the New Covenant, the Church.

The responsorial psalm is the psalter's classical act of contrition—Psalm 50. (51)

2nd reading: Hebrews 5: 7-9

This short reading is a meditation on Christ's priesthood, and tells us that Jesus Christ, in his humanity, identified Himself with man, suffered as men do, and through His patient obedience is the compassionate priest and victim who made eternal life possible to all who believe in Him.

This doctrine is then more fully developed in subsequent verses of this letter.

Gospel: John 12: 20-33

John, again with the perspective of 60 or so years of preaching, injects into His Gospel an incident which among other things points out the openness of the nations to the mission of Christ. John's device is simple — some Greeks express a desire to meet Jesus.

John then tells of Christ's apprehension at approaching events which will culminate in His suffering and death, and ultimately His triumphant resurrection, which will result in so much good for mankind. The imagery of the Gospel text — the grain of wheat, dying in order to blossom into life, a man losing his life to save it, teaches by means of paradox.

The brief metaphor has a multiplicity of applications. As a call to dedication, the grain that dies can stand for all the discipline of work, the sacrifice of time and self and leisure, that goes into the making of people who contribute to life — like teachers, artists, students, parents. . . It also teaches that there must be death to selfishness, so that we can see self in others, and be of service to the world — to neighbor.

Sometimes the parable can lead us to think of heroic application. There is a story (parable) in Eastern or Oriental lore of the bird that flew back and forth repeatedly from a lake to a raging forest fire with a drop of water in its beak to put out the blaze. When asked why it persisted in something so futile, the bird answered: "I must do what I can." And it continued to fly with the drop of water, until on one of its journeys, it flew too close and perished in the flames.

It is not a story only for heroes. How many people come to old age and approaching death and seem wearied and dismayed that apparently they have accomplished so little. They will not even take refuge in the words, "I did what I could," because there is often the nagging thought that they could have done more.

It may not sound very romantic to say that no one should ever think of himself as a failure if he has ever contributed to love in the world. Love is not merely a psychic energy; it is the divine energy; it does, indeed, as the lyrics of the beautiful theme from the musical "Lili" state: "make the world go round," and if we seem to live and die with little accomplished, like the bird in the parable, we do not know what we have achieved except that love is of God, and nothing of goodness is ever lost with God.

FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT - Cycle C

1st reading: Isaías 43: 16-21

The new Exodus is a favorite theme of Isaías. The opening verses recall the features of the Exodus out of Egypt which culminated in the destruction of the Egyptian army. However, the remembrance of the past events is a useless practice, if it has no application in the present.

No matter how marvelous was this first deliverance, it is nothing in comparison with the “new deed” which now comes to light at God’s hand.

The Exodus from Egypt was the initial creative event in the Old Testament revelation. At this event, the descendants of Jacob and Abraham became conscious of their identity as a people, and a people especially picked out by God. This revelation and the event of the Exodus has much the same significance for the Jews as the Resurrection of Christ has for Christians.

In both testaments, the creative events take place at the birth of the Jewish and Christian Churches respectively. The Jewish Nation and Church was born in the events of the revelation which followed upon the Exodus. The Christian Church was born at the resurrection of Christ.

2nd reading: Philippians 3: 8-14

Paul presents in this passage the meaning of justification. It is totally founded in Christ, and to be valued beyond everything else. The distinction between following the law or following Christ, a constant pre-occupation with Paul, leads to the strong emphasis in this passage on faith in Jesus Christ and knowledge of Him.

Our justification comes thru our union with Christ; faith in him is its cause. We are not saved by our own efforts or by the Law, but by God’s work in us.

The latter half of the reading is a resume of a Christian’s lenten program: reproducing the pattern of Christ’s death so as to share His resurrection, straining ahead for what is still to come.

Gospel: John 8: 1-11

The incident told in this morning’s Gospel is a familiar one. The opponents of Jesus continued their efforts to trap Him in legal technicalities, but Jesus simply refuses to be baited; he refuses to pass judgement. There is no mystical or theological meaning to the

tracing of figures in the sand: Christ merely indicates his disinterest in the proceedings.

The point of the story is not that sin is of no importance, or that God does not punish sin. Rather, the lesson is that God extends mercy so that the sinner may turn from sin. Jesus Christ came to save not to condemn. Yet the women's accusers, because of their attitude are judged by the presence of Jesus, and no doubt embarrassed. They are revealed to be self-righteous hypocrites who cannot stand the idea of forgiveness.

So the lesson we are to draw from the passage is that God is understanding of human weakness, and mercifully forgives. We are to act in a like manner with one another. The same point is made in last Sunday's reading of the Prodigal son, and the forgiveness and love shown by his father.

There is another point to be made. The call to repentance and conversion is now intensified with the approach of Holy Week. There is a kind of agitation in the readings — something new is impending. The Exodus signaled the beginning of Israel as a people; Paul preaches the meaning of justification — a new beginning in Christ. And the woman in the gospel passage is told to go and sin no more — to make a new start. Conversion is a new beginning.

We are constantly making new beginnings in our lives — each time we try to overcome a little fault or failing or sin, we begin again, because the love and mercy of God makes it possible for us to do so. And the holiness that follows upon our efforts comes not really from ourselves—our efforts, but is freely given or bestowed by God.

FIFTH WEEK IN LENT

Optional Mass

1st reading: II Kings 4: 18b-21, 32-37

The Elisha stories in II Kings are, in part, designed to establish the authority of the prophets, and they are a mixture of fact and fiction, much like the many legends and stories told about St. Francis of Assisi and his followers. They are impressions of Elisha's disciples, and attest to his influence on them. His memory was revered.

Gospel: John 11: 1-45

The raising of Lazarus from the dead is the last of the signs in the life and light series recorded by St. John. The restoration of life to Lazarus is a sign of the power of Jesus to give eternal life, which begins already here on earth. This miracle is a sign of the rising from sin to grace, and a sign of the final resurrection.

The doctrine contained in this passage is one that calls for a response in faith. "I am the resurrection, if anyone believes in me. . . he will never die." Jesus is not referring to physical life, but the life of grace—spiritual life—which will endure for all eternity. Jesus is saying, in verse 26, that the effects of the resurrection have already taken place, that the believer already possesses true or eternal life, and so physical death cannot really affect him.

This passage and incident remind us of how the christian should approach death, and that we should see it not so much as an ending, but rather a beginning of a more perfect life. The Preface of the Mass for the Dead states it so well. "Life is not ended, it is transformed. . ." into something better — a more perfect sharing in the life of God.

MONDAY OF THE FIFTH WEEK IN LENT

1st reading: Daniel 13: passim

The story of the chaste Suzanna is one which exegetes study and search for deep meanings, but without any great success. Simply, it is an example with a most obvious purpose — to show that with God's help virtue will triumph over vice. God will save those who remain faithful to him and his law.

John 8: 1-11 (In Years A & B)

See commentary on the gospel for the fifth Sunday in Lent, Cycle C.

Gospel: John 8: 12-20 (In Year C)

The theme of the feast of tabernacles was that of light which symbolized the divine presence. Here Jesus proclaims that he is the light of the world, the divine presence among men, because in him one finds the revelation of God which makes known the purpose and meaning of life to us.

Christ insists again on the truth of his testimony, and gives his two witnesses: Himself and His Father. When asked to produce the Father, Christ tells them that if they really recognized him, they would know the Father.

In the midst of the discussion Christ says that He judges no one, but that His presence among men causes them to judge themselves by either accepting or rejecting Him, and this judgement will be ratified at the final judgement by Himself and His Father.

TUESDAY OF THE FIFTH WEEK IN LENT

1st reading: Numbers 21: 4-9

The Israelites were weary after wandering around so long in the desert; their direct path to the promised land was blocked by the Edomites. The people got restless and were unhappy and they began to grumble against Moses and God.

As a punishment God sent poisonous snakes among them, and many died. They then admitted that they had sinned by their lack of faith and trust in God, and they asked Moses to intercede for them with the Lord.

Moses was told to make a bronze serpent, and erect it as a standard, and whoever looked on it would be healed. This may smack of magic or superstition to us, but the author of this sacred book assures us that God controls the whole situation, and that it is God who heals. What is demanded of the people is faith in God when they look on the standard.

St. John sees this erecting of the bronze serpent as a type of Christ's crucifixion.

Gospel: John 8: 21-30

In today's passage Jesus informs the Jews what their rejection of Himself means. He is soon to return to the Father, and they will die without the gift of eternal life. The Jews misunderstand Him, and Jesus speaks a profound truth. He will voluntarily lay down his life, but it will not benefit them because they reject Him. He has come from heaven to give them the life that the world is incapable of giving. They can acquire it only by believing that He is the Messiah.

Still misunderstanding, they ask Christ who He is. His answer is that He is the unique representative of the Father that He has always claimed to be.

St. John gives us the impression that Christ just could not get through to the people who questioned Him. They refused to take Christ at His word. Almost exasperated He tells them that after His death and His glorification it will be clear to them who He is.

Faith demands an openness to truth, a willingness to believe.

WEDNESDAY OF THE FIFTH WEEK IN LENT

1st reading: Daniel 3: *passim*

Three Hebrew youths refused to worship the golden statue that the king had set up. In the face of threats to throw them into a fiery furnace they persisted, believing that God could save them, and would, if they professed their belief in Him. And they were delivered from the fire by an angel of the Lord.

The king was highly impressed that their God had intervened to save them.

The point of the story is clear. God will protect His people from harm if they remain faithful to him. The lesson was quite pertinent for the Jews around the year 165 BC when Antichus IV was ordering the Jews to take part in pagan worship under threat of death. The story of the three youths gave the Israelites the courage to resist.

Gospel: John 8: 31-42

Behind the discourse which makes up today's reading is the Jewish belief that being a descendant of Abraham automatically guarantees salvation. Christ tells the people what is necessary to be his disciple. Not only must they hear the word he preaches, but they must live accordingly. If they do this, they will possess the truth.

As descendants of Abraham they insist that they are already free. But Jesus responds that simply being a Jew does not make one free. They can be freed from sin only by the Son of God.

Christ tells them that their works show that they are not the real children of Abraham, because they lack his faith. They are, rather, of the devil. If they were children of God, then they would recognize Him, and give credence to what he preached.

The message for us: faith is the key to eternal life, and this faith must influence our actions.

THURSDAY OF THE FIFTH WEEK IN LENT

1st reading: Genesis 17: 3-9

In this passage or version of God's covenant with Abraham, God is the principle actor. Abraham simply listens, and makes a sign of reverence. God is the only one bound to anything.

God binds Himself to three things:

- 1) to give Abraham numerous descendants;
- 2) to give him and his descendants the land to which they recently migrated; and
- 3) to be their God.

Abram's name is changed to Abraham—which means father of many nations, or peoples. This emphasizes that a new era is to begin with the covenant.

The text stresses that this covenant is not only with Abraham, but with his posterity, and it is therefore to be a perpetual covenant.

This text, in reminding us that God's covenant is for all times, tells us that God has a covenant with man still today — and we are that people who are the beneficiaries of his promises.

Gospel: John 8: 51-59

Christ had accused the Jews of being the children of Satan, and they counter with the statement that He is possessed by the devil; which Christ denies. He then warns the people that they will be judged for what they have said about Him.

Today's gospel takes up at this point. If they will keep His word they will have eternal life. The people misunderstand the remark and think that He means they will be free from physical death. Is he greater than Abraham and the prophets, all of whom have died?

Jesus simply replies that the Father will vindicate Him, and Yes. He is greater than Abraham, who was but a forerunner of Him, and Abraham knew that.

The Jews scoff at this, and so Christ becomes most explicit, and proclaims his divine name. I AM (with all the meaning that it conveys in Hebrew)—“I am he who causes all that is to come into existence.” There is no mistaking this. They clearly understand Him—He is saying He is God, and the penalty for blasphemy is death. But Jesus escapes them.

At the end of this Lenten season, this reminder of just who Jesus is, is meant to give us renewed hope and confidence. Yes. It is God who has redeemed us, and His saving acts we are about to renew in our liturgical rites of Holy Week.

FRIDAY OF THE FIFTH WEEK IN LENT

1st reading: Jeremiah 20: 10-13

In the chapter prior to this, Jeremiah foretold the destruction of Jerusalem. The people didn't like to hear this, so he was arrested and beaten.

Our reading is part of his complaint to God at this mistreatment and the abuse that his prophetic office brought him. But even in the midst of this he can and does place his trust in God.

The source of his confidence is God's promise that he would always be with him, and that his enemies would not overcome him. The final verse is to praise God who takes care of the poor—these Jeremiah identified with the pious and those who had faith in God.

Gospel: John 10: 31-42

The gospel for this morning continues running dialogue of Jesus with the Jews—they ask if he is the Messiah. Jesus insists on His unity with His Father, which the Jews take as an affirmation, but they refuse to accept this affirmative reply. They accuse him of blasphemy.

Christ replies with a rabbinical argument—In the Old Testament the judges could be called gods because they were the vehicles of God's words. All the more can He be called God since He has been consecrated (anointed) and sent into the world as the unique representative of God. And He appeals to the works that he did as proof of His divine origin.

Again, this gospel passage is a reminder for us to renew our faith in Christ.

SATURDAY OF THE FIFTH WEEK IN LENT

1st reading: Ezechiel 37: 21-29

Ezechiel describes for the exiles the new Israel that is to rise once God has completed his punishment of the people for their infidelity. The two kingdoms—Israel and Judah—will once again be united to form a new kingdom under a new David.

God will preserve them from a new apostasy, and under the new king they will live in obedience to God.

A new covenant of peace will be established between God and the people, and his presence will be experienced by the people.

This prophecy of Ezechiel has obvious reference to the new Israel—the Church—and the continued presence of Christ in our midst.

Gospel: John 11: 45-56

This passage is John's conclusion to the agitation that has been building up. The last straw was Christ's gift of life to Lazarus. This leads now to Christ's death.

Many who witnessed this miracle believed in Him, but others reported the incident to the Pharisees, and a meeting of the Sanhedrin is called.

If Jesus is some kind of revolutionary, then the Roman authority may intervene and destroy the temple and the nations. Caiphas then makes his statement — all had been leading up to this — get rid of Jesus lest he provoke the Romans to destroy the whole nation.

What Caiphas didn't know was that he was prophesying: Christ would die for the nation, but not for the nation alone; he would die for all men, to make all one.

Christ finds out about their plan to kill him and so withdraws from the city. As the passover draws near, everyone is waiting to see if Jesus will show up in Jerusalem, since orders were out for his arrest. The stage is now set for the triumphal entry into the city.

PASSION SUNDAY (PALM SUNDAY)

Processional Gospel: Matthew 21: 1-11 - Cycle A

Just how public an affair the entry into Jerusalem was is difficult to say, but the fact that all four gospels mention it indicates that it has some significance, some messianic significance. It is obvious in Matthew's text as he refers to the prophecy of Zacharias: "Your king comes to you. . . astride an ass. . ." (9:9). And Matthew adds the title: "Son of David," to the cry of the people. This is a more specific title than the simple: "He who comes in the name of the Lord."

Processional Gospel: Mark 11: 1-10 - Cycle B

St. Mark makes no reference to the prophecy of Zacharias, but reading the text one knows that he was aware of it. Mark's account is very simple, and the readers of the text would read between the lines. They would think of the long-fallen kingdom of David. Jesus was to triumph through the destruction of the temple of His body, through His death and subsequent resurrection. Through this triumph His kingdom would come to men of faith and love.

Alternate Gospel, Year B - John 12: 12-16

St. John tells us that the disciples did not understand the full meaning of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem until after the resurrection. This enlightenment came with the reception of the Holy Spirit and their enhanced faith. After the resurrection they realized the meaning of Jesus' messiahship; He was King of Israel, the new Israel of the people of God. His triumph was brought about through the humility of the cross.

Processional Gospel: Luke 19: 28-40 - Cycle C

Luke, like St. Mark does not mention the Old Testament prophecy of Zacharias, but he knew of the text. The *Jerome Biblical Commentary* points out that an ass was the mount of a prince who entered a town peacefully and joyfully. The enthusiasm of the crowd is marked by St. Luke, and contrasted to the objection of the Pharisees. Jesus tells them that a greater sign would be given, a greater recognition than the demonstration they are witnessing at present; prophetically this crying out of the stones is a reference to the destruction of the city and the temple.

PASSION SUNDAY (PALM SUNDAY)

Readings 1 & 2 - Cycles A, B, C

1st reading: Isaías: 50: 4-7

Our first reading from Isaías is the third Song of the Suffering Servant. The servant is portrayed as the perfect disciple of God whose consecration to the divine will makes reconciliation available to all men. His identity is somewhat obscure — is he an individual, or is it a corporate personality. The Hebrew indicates that both meanings are to be taken, just as in the New Testament, “the body of Christ” could mean the risen body of Jesus and/or the Christian community.

In this particular song, the servant speaks of his total consecration to God and his conviction that God will sustain him through all the insults and sufferings he must bear in order to carry out the divine will.

We can see, therefore, that it might be applicable to an individual, and to the christian community as a whole, just as Isaías in prophecy meant the people who would remain faithful to God, and to Christ — THE SERVANT OF GOD.

2nd reading: Philippians 2: 6-11

This hymn of the early christians provides a theology which interprets Christ's life and death, particularly as a complement to the first reading from Isaías. And it serves as well as an introduction to the passion narrative of St. Luke.

The life of Christ is an *emptying* of what is due to Him because of his divine status (equality with God), and an *acceptance* of the duties of a slave or servant. These duties, accepted with *obedience*, lead to his death which in turn brings about his glorification.

He is exalted above all creation, and receives the name which is superior to all others: LORD.

A name signifies the true nature of a person or event, the true power of a person. As a result of his obedience Jesus is named LORD by the Father. Obedience is the characteristic attitude towards His Father, as is pointed out by St. Matthew, by Paul in writing to the Hebrews, and most recently in Vatican II's Constitution on the Church.

This passage is one of the earliest christian hymns used in the liturgy.

PASSION SUNDAY (PALM SUNDAY) - Cycle A

Gospel: Passion according to St. Matthew

The gospels are not biographies of Jesus Christ. Their purpose is far more precise, as summed up by St. John: "These things are written that you may *believe* that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." (20:31). The evangelists seek to bring out the *meaning* of the person and work of Jesus, and the demands of his teaching. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the passion narrative. Historically this is the first part of the story of Jesus to take form and shape in the preaching and the liturgy of the Church.

On the surface we have the story of a man abandoned by his supporters, deserted by a handful of disciples (betrayed by one of them), condemned by the religious leaders of his people, executed by the Roman authorities. The care of the early christians was to show the real dimension of these events, to point out their truly epoch-making character.

Despite appearances, this is *the* moment—God's moment in man's history: the Christ event, the redemptive death and life-giving resurrection of the Son of God. It is the great culminating moment of God's saving plan for mankind.

St. Matthew in his account is anxious to underline two factors among others: 1) that the passion fulfills the prophecies of the Scripture, and 2) that Jesus's foreknowledge and free decision put him in complete control of the situation.

There is room for a contemporary reflection. Perhaps at no other time in the history of mankind has the absurdity of suffering taken on the intensity as in our own day and age. We have at our disposal so many means to alleviate suffering and hardship, and it is paradoxical that there is still so much of it in the world today — poverty in our own country, dire poverty in some of the new emerging nations of the world, sufferings caused by senseless war, fought because men cannot trustingly dialogue with each other. Apart from that there is the petty suffering we cause one another because of a lack of charity and understanding, and a lack of considerateness and courtesy for one another.

During this week we will reflect on the human condition and death — how it comes, whether it is always feared or occasionally welcomed. It is not too much to assume that Jesus himself as man found it hard to die. Many people proclaimed to be shocked at the language in *Jesus Christ Superstar*, when the Jesus figure shouted

to his Father: "Show me there's a reason for your wanting me to die. You're far too keen on where and how, and not so hot on why."

This is simply another way—the contemporary generation's way of expressing the thought or words of the evangelist: "Father, let this cup pass away from me." This may be a stylized expression, but it tells of the dread of a man confronted with his death agony, and the loss of all that is dearest, like friendship, health, and now life. Christ concludes: "Not my will, but yours be done."

But the surrender is not so easily achieved. Isaias says of himself: "The Lord has given me a disciples tongue, to know how to answer the weary." This is supremely true of Jesus—he learned in the school of human life, as an example to us. He is the tangible example to whom we can turn, with whom we can identify. There is no other way to learn about the mystery of suffering and hardship. This is the magnificent secret of the christian faith — that our God is not a far and distant God, but one who shared our meals, our companionship, our living and even our dying.

In another modern version of Christ's death, in the play *Godspell*, the apostles all gather at the foot of cross and bear His body tenderly on their hands, over their heads, out thru the stilled crowd of onlookers, and the audience, singing a beautiful short creed of their own: LONG LIVE GOD.

This version might seem to telescope history, because the original apostles were almost all reported in hiding at the time of Christ's death. *But we are apostles*. The actors in this play represent us. It is *our* love for Jesus, *our* creed they are singing.

The Scriptures do not answer all the gnawing doubts and questions we may have about the mystery of suffering and death, the acceptance of suffering and death. Man must continue to wrestle with this, and with faith he will discover something about himself and His God. There is probably no answer, on the logical level, to the problem presented by the existence of suffering contrasted with the goodness of God. The answer must come on an entirely different level—the level of faith, as the Gospels, and especially the Passion narratives, demonstrate.

PASSION SUNDAY (PALM SUNDAY) - Cycle B

1st reading: Isaias 50: 4-7

See Passion Sunday - Cycle A

2nd reading: Philippians 2: 6-11

See Passion Sunday - Cycle A

Gospel: The Passion according to Mark 14: 1-15:47

Jesus is the Suffering Servant who gives Himself up for all men. He proclaims His high-priesthood. Mark shows Jesus standing alone, deserted by his followers, even Peter. He is ridiculed by those standing by, and there is irony in the recognition and acceptance of Jesus as savior by the centurion. Belief and unbelief are contrasted by Mark; and Christ's humility leads to the highest achievement.

See remarks for Cycle A and Cycle C

PASSION SUNDAY (PALM SUNDAY) - Cycle C

1st reading: Isaias 50: 4-7

See Passion Sunday - Cycle A

2nd reading: Philippians: 2: 6-11

See Passion Sunday - Cycle A

Gospel: The Passion according to Luke 22: 14-23:56

The theme of Luke's passion narrative may be summed up in one word: UPHEAVAL. When Christ is betrayed by one of his twelve intimate associates, Peter undergoes a deep personal crisis. He begins as a violent defender of Jesus to the point that he wants to use the sword in his defense, but he gradually realizes that he is defending his own preconception of what Jesus should have been. His later denial of Christ must have been a devastating blow to the pride of this otherwise strong man.

Confronted by the approach of his suffering and death, Christ, too, experiences in his human nature a personal crisis and indecision.

The whole course of events is a series of paradoxes. Those learned in the Law mock and condemn Him, while a bandit pro-

claims Him as a King. The climax is reached in the death of Jesus: the earth shakes at his triumph over evil; the old covenant, symbolized by the temple curtain, is rendered null and void.

In general, St. Luke paints a vivid picture of the dislocations brought about by Christ's death and his victory over evil. This transformation leaves no one and nothing untouched. Man is given freedom to choose between continued slavery or blessed liberation. It is ironic that the first one to recognize this is the centurion — a non Jew. He professes his faith in Christ; the religious leaders of the people are nowhere to be found at history's most momentous moment. The Gospels record no immediate reaction on their part but continued obstinacy, noted both in the scriptures and in secular histories.

The following of Christ involves an upheaval on the personal level. As familiar as we are with the events of the life of Christ which we commemorate in our liturgy at this time of the year, we are still impressed by them — they do shake us — and they should.

The readings say something to us in our troubled times. The concept of corporate suffering in the first reading is an excellent starting point for a christian understanding of the Passion of Christ. We are identified with him in such a way that we must live out in our own lives what he has experienced in his sufferings and death.

Christianity is not a spectator religion. The teachings of Christ must be taken to heart, and must influence our daily living; it must influence our encounters with others on a personal level. People who come into contact with us must be able to recognize or sense a Christ-like concern for them in what we say to them; in what we do for them; in who we are for them.

Only then do we do as Christ did — bring redemption into the realities of today's consternation. Only then will redemption and salvation have a meaning for the world in which we live and work — and that world is made up of the people and events in your immediate neighborhood, beginning with your own community.

WE have accepted a call and an invitation to the religious life, and with it a mission—the very same one given to Christ, as in a very real sense we extend Christ's person in our very day and age. WE preach by word, but mainly by example, the truth that God loves us, and that we should love him.

Carrying out a mission often implies hardship, as our readings for today's mass show, especially the events in the life of Christ

which we just read. Being Christian, and religious, we must bear the burden of a virtuous life. It will be difficult if we look upon it as something oppressive (and unfortunately some do consider the religious life restrictive rather than a grace of freedom and joy). St. Paul sees the Christian life as a challenge—to love God is a challenge which opens new vistas to man. How much more then our intense religious effort to love God.

We live in relative peace and prosperity, and it is so easy to just take being a religious for granted, and drift along with the community—say our prayers, do our work fairly well, conform externally but not really give of ourselves to others, much less, therefore, to God.

We are called to be prophets for God. As your prayer sheet or proposed meditation for Community day states for your consideration in the very last paragraph, FAITH MEANS MORE THAN MERE ADHERENCE TO A SYSTEM OF TRUTHS AND TEACHINGS. Today when our christian and religious values are being challenged and questioned, we must risk being unpopular and stand up for them. Virtue will always cause some to look up and take notice — and to the degree that they are not virtuous, they will object to virtue. As I said earlier, christianity is not a spectator religion. Religious life is in no way to be a passive life. We must assume initiative once we accept the graces given us by God—and these graces are all around us — persons, things, events. And it takes an awful lot of faith to see some of them, and once seeing them, to make some practical impact on our lives, to the extent that we are recognized as witnesses for Christ. The late Cardinal Meyer once said that we don't become Christ's witnesses by simply standing up and saying we are such, but we must show it in how we live, in what we do. Religious life is a serious business.

You are in the midst of a renewal program which will have far reaching consequences for your community. I presume that all of you are vitally interested in the future of the community and religious life. I AM. Pray for the courage and the fortitude that is needed to change what must be changed, to stand up and speak out for the truth, for necessary change, and for the evangelical absolutes, too, that are of the essence of religious living.

I sometimes think the patience of God is tried, but knowing that God is extremely tolerant, as salvation history shows, he will continue to send prophets into our midst, and eventually they will

be heard—those that are not driven away. It is our enthusiasm in our love of God and of each other that will keep them in our midst, and therefore keep God in our midst.

MONDAY OF HOLY WEEK

1st reading: Isaias 42: 1-7

The first four verses of our reading contain the first song of the suffering servant. It presents the investiture of the servant by God.

He is the one who has been especially chosen by God and endowed with the Spirit of God or the power of God, to accomplish a mission to all nations.

As king and prophet his mission is to bring forth justice, that is, to reveal to all nations that YAHWEH alone is God. If the nations are convinced of this they will have salvation. The servant will carry out his mission quietly and patiently.

The following verses, vs. 5-7, are a commentary on the Son: He is to be the tool whereby God effects the salvation of the nations, brings them to enlightenment and liberates them from suffering.

Gospel: John 12: 1-11

What we have in this passage is probably the recollections of the apostles about the last days of Jesus. After his triumphal procession into Jerusalem, he retired to Bethany, the home of Lazarus and his sisters. There Mary anoints his feet with a costly ointment. Judas complains of the waste. St. John uses this opportunity to portray Judas as a thief, and remarks that his complaint was hypocritical.

Then John explains that the anointing was in preparation for his burial.

The last part of the passage is a sort of commentary that could well have preceded the story recorded here. John simply wants to point out that the hatred for Jesus extends even to Lazarus because many are believing in Jesus as a result of His raising Lazarus from the dead.

TUESDAY OF HOLY WEEK

1st reading: Isaiah 49: 1-6

The second song of the suffering servant is presented here. The servant speaks and addresses all nations. He tells how He has been called by God, and given His mission, and that He is under the protection of God.

At first his mission had been to Israel, to bring her back to God. But it seemed that his work was in vain, and he had been discouraged.

He puts his trust in God, and sought no recognition for himself among the people, but only from God. God now gives him a new task, to extend his mission of salvation to all nations.

The servant is identified in verse 3 as Israel—we are to understand this to be the ideal Israel. The chosen people of the old covenant were to be the instrument of salvation for all men. Christ is the idealization of Israel. He is the instrument in the hands of God to bring about the accomplishment of salvation for all.

Gospel: John 13: 2-133,36-38

At the last supper Jesus foretells his betrayal by Judas. John indicates that Christ has complete control of the situation, as he does throughout his narrative of the passion. Judas does not leave to effect the betrayal until Jesus gives him permission to leave.

By placing the event at night, John indicates that the hour or time of Jesus' death has arrived. The night symbolizes a time of foreboding. But Christ tells his apostles his glorification is at hand—this involves returning to His Father and leaving them.

He assures them that their inability to follow Him is only temporary, because in time they will follow Him through their own deaths and resurrection to life.

Peter does not understand fully what Jesus means, but professes complete loyalty, only to be told that he will deny Christ before the night is over.

The inconstancy of Peter is hinted at, and it can serve as a reminder to us to really live for Christ, as we promise to do by our Baptismal profession, (and we religious further emphasize that by our religious dedication).

WEDNESDAY OF HOLY WEEK

1st reading: Isaías 50: 4-9a

The third song of the suffering servant is an act of confidence and trust in God. He describes his openness to the Lord, receiving from him the word he is to preach to others.

But he was persecuted for carrying out his mission. In spite of this he remained true to his mission, and persevered in doing his work. He accepted his suffering as part of his mission, as God's will for him.

He is so certain that suffering is part of his mission and God's will that he openly challenges his oppressors to enter into a legal contest before God; and he is certain that God will justify him.

Gospel: Matthew 26: 14-25

Matthew, like John, intends to show that Christ had foreknowledge of what awaited him—his death is part of God's plan, the fulfillment of what the Scriptures had foretold. And Matthew stresses Christ's obedience to the will of His Father.

He uses the Old Testament Scriptures—the price Judas received he knows from Zecharias' prophecy. He has Christ make reference to his death with the use of the words: "my time is at hand." He must die "as it is written."

So as we approach the end of Lent the Church wants to emphasize for us that God took the initiative on our behalf. Christ knew what was in store for him, and willingly endured it, because this was the will of God.

3rd reading: Exodus 14:15—15:1

The Exodus event is the central saving event of the Old Testament. The people were delivered from bondage in Egypt, and in the subsequent events became conscious of their identity as a people specially chosen by God to mediate salvation.

It is part of the Passover liturgy of the Jews—they commemorate this historical event. The purpose is to glorify God, which is precisely the intent we have in reading this passage in our Paschal liturgy.

The theme of deliverance is developed throughout the Old Testament, and there are many references in the New Testament. All of these are intended to remind us to praise and thank God. The deliverance of the Jews from Egypt set in motion the events that led to the coming of Christ and our inheriting the rights of the chosen people.

This passage stresses the intervention of God. The parting of the waters is designed to show God's power and to duly impress the people. How much of a miracle was required of God is uncertain—natural phenomena such as wind (which the text mentions) and tide could account to making it possible for the people to cross the sea of Reeds. Another natural phenomena such as a sudden storm could have caused the destruction of the Egyptian army, or prevented them from pursuing the people. The text probably makes use of hyperbole to make the story all the more impressive—"not a single one escaped." It is a typical device in epic.

But the lesson is simply to make the people conscious of God's concern for them.

The first verse of the Canticle of Moses is appended to the Exodus passage. In this long hymn, which is then taken up in the responsorial, Moses expresses his thanks to God on behalf of the people.

The prayer which concludes the reading and response draws an analogy between God's intervention of the past and the intervention and salvation that comes by means of Baptism. An alternate prayer asks that all nations may share the faith and privilege of Israel and come to life in the Spirit.

4th reading: Isaiah 54: 5-14

This prophetic passage is a promise of a new and glorious Israel. The initiative of God is stressed especially in forgiving the people

and taking pity on them. The text offers hope and consolation. The fulfillment of this prophecy is the new covenant of God with the Church, the new Israel, the new people of God.

The responsorial psalm (ps. 30) thanks God for the help given to his people. And the concluding prayer asks God to glorify His name by increasing the number of his people in the Church.

5th reading: Isaias 55: 1-11

The 55th chapter of Isaias is an invitation to grace. The language is poetic, as is much of Deutero-Isaias. It begins with a series of imperatives inviting the people to a banquet of divine joy—to eat, to drink, to partake and delight in rich fare.

The prophet speaks in terms that the people will understand—a banquet is a time for rejoicing, a time for good things. The imagery is used in the New Testament in the references to a nuptial banquet in Matthew and the Apocalypse; to the paschal banquet in Luke, and to the eschatological banquet in Matthew and Luke.

The second part is exhortatory. The people are urged to seek the Lord and to turn to Him. The final part speaks of the blessings that will follow upon this devotion to the Lord.

The prayer which follows is our acknowledgement of our dependence on God's grace for growing in goodness.

6th reading: Baruch: 3: 9-15, 34—4:4

The prophet tells the Israelites that they are now in exile because of their infidelities. They have abandoned God and so are spiritually dead. He preaches the importance of wisdom that is expressed in commandments. These are the source of life. The concluding verse says that if Israel does not observe the law, God will forsake them in favor of another.

In the response God is praised for His law.

The concluding prayer asks God to increase His people in the Church, by continuing to call all men to salvation, and preserve in grace those already called.

7th reading: Ezechiel 36: 16-17a, 18-28

This final Old Testament reading is taken from the second half of the 36th chapter of Ezechiel. It speaks to us of a new creation—a new heart and a new spirit, which are brought about

GOOD FRIDAY

1st reading: Isaias 52: 13–53:12

This passage is the most renowned of the Songs of the Suffering Servant. The servant in one with the people in their sorrow, and yet distinct in that he is innocent and totally committed to the service of God.

The opening words are God's, and they tell of the triumph of the servant: "he shall be lifted up, exalted." We immediately think of the cross. It is a distinct reference to Christ's triumph through the cross. The fulfillment of these passages or songs of the servant (the first three were read on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of this week) is in Christ. They speak so obviously of His mission.

With the beginning of chapter 53 (the fourth verse of our reading), the nations become the speakers. And they question the servant's rejection by his own people; the nations then confess their own guilt. The servant suffers for all.

His victory is proclaimed at the end of the song. God will accomplish His will through Him. The closing verses glorify the servant for identifying himself with his sorrowful fellow men.

2nd reading: Hebrews 4: 14-16; 5: 7-9

Jesus is presented as the compassionate High Priest, mediator between God and man. He intercedes for man, and offers man's gifts to God, and "sacrifices for sin." The compassionate quality of the ideal priest is stressed in verses that are omitted from this reading. The latter half of the present reading directly refers to Christ's public life. We are reminded that Jesus prayed for us (5:7); he suffered (5:8), and thus made possible our access to God's mercy.

The Passion according to St. John

John's account is a dramatic presentation of Christ's triumph. Throughout Jesus is in command of the situation: at his arrest; at his trial before Pilate. There is irony in the account; it is Pilate who is really on trial and who is really being judged by Jesus. And the Jews, too, are being judged by their very denial of Christ.

The way of the cross is presented as a triumphal procession. Jesus is always the central figure; no aid is given Him in bearing

the heavy beam. And the last word of Jesus is one of triumph: “IT IS FULFILLED.”

John is the only one who mentions the piercing of the side of Jesus. (Of the evangelists, he was the only eye-witness), and the flow of water and blood, which we take to be symbolic of Baptism and the Eucharist — the sources of the life that Christ gives.

EASTER VIGIL

Service of the readings:

1st reading: Genesis 1:1–2:2

The creation narrative is appropriate for the Easter Vigil because it presents the God of Israel as the God of all nature and all history. It is the initial act of salvation history. An analogy that we are to make as to the appropriateness of the reading is that a new creation begins with the death and resurrection of Christ.

The responsorial psalm (ps. 104) praises God for the beauty of creation. Or the alternate responsorial (ps. 33) speaks of the goodness of God.

The prayer which follows asks that we may come to appreciate this new creation by which we are redeemed. An alternate prayer asks that we may persevere against sin and so be worthy of eternal joy.

2nd reading: Genesis 22: 1-18

Abraham’s obedience is tested by God who asks the sacrifice of his son. The story indicates how difficult this was for Abraham because he dearly loved his son and only heir. God’s promise to make him the father of a great nation depended on him. Abraham’s unquestioning obedience leads us to recall Christ’s obedience to His Father. His life was sacrificed.

The responsorial psalm (ps. 16) presents Christ speaking of his resurrection from the dead. The tone of the psalm is joyous and the response is full of hope.

The prayer concluding this reading speaks of the fidelity of God in fulfilling his promises to Abraham, and now to us. It asks that we respond to God’s call to the new life of grace.

3rd reading: Exodus 14:15–15:1

The Exodus event is the central saving event of the Old Testament. The people were delivered from bondage in Egypt, and in the subsequent events became conscious of their identity as a people specially chosen by God to mediate salvation.

It is part of the Passover liturgy of the Jews—they commemorate this historical event. The purpose is to glorify God, which is precisely the intent we have in reading this passage in our Paschal liturgy.

The theme of deliverance is developed throughout the Old Testament, and there are many references in the New Testament. All of these are intended to remind us to praise and thank God. The deliverance of the Jews from Egypt set in motion the events that led to the coming of Christ and our inheriting the rights of the chosen people.

This passage stresses the intervention of God. The parting of the waters is designed to show God's power and to duly impress the people. How much of a miracle was required of God is uncertain—natural phenomena such as wind (which the text mentions) and tide could account to making it possible for the people to cross the sea of Reeds. Another natural phenomena such as a sudden storm could have caused the destruction of the Egyptian army, or prevented them from pursuing the people. The text probably makes use of hyperbole to make the story all the more impressive—"not a single one escaped." It is a typical device in epic.

But the lesson is simply to make the people conscious of God's concern for them.

The first verse of the Cantic of Moses is appended to the Exodus passage. In this long hymn, which is then taken up in the responsorial, Moses expresses his thanks to God on behalf of the people.

The prayer which concludes the reading and response draws an analogy between God's intervention of the past and the intervention and salvation that comes by means of Baptism. An alternate prayer asks that all nations may share the faith and privilege of Israel and come to life in the Spirit.

4th reading: Isaias 54: 5-14

This prophetic passage is a promise of a new and glorious Israel. The initiative of God is stressed especially in forgiving the people

and taking pity on them. The text offers hope and consolation. The fulfillment of this prophecy is the new covenant of God with the Church, the new Israel, the new people of God.

The responsorial psalm (ps. 30) thanks God for the help given to his people. And the concluding prayer asks God to glorify His name by increasing the number of his people in the Church.

5th reading: Isaias 55: 1-11

The 55th chapter of Isaias is an invitation to grace. The language is poetic, as is much of Deutero-Isaias. It begins with a series of imperatives inviting the people to a banquet of divine joy—to eat, to drink, to partake and delight in rich fare.

The prophet speaks in terms that the people will understand—a banquet is a time for rejoicing, a time for good things. The imagery is used in the New Testament in the references to a nuptial banquet in Matthew and the Apocalypse; to the paschal banquet in Luke, and to the eschatological banquet in Matthew and Luke.

The second part is exhortatory. The people are urged to seek the Lord and to turn to Him. The final part speaks of the blessings that will follow upon this devotion to the Lord.

The prayer which follows is our acknowledgement of our dependence on God's grace for growing in goodness.

6th reading: Baruch: 3: 9-15, 34—4:4

The prophet tells the Israelites that they are now in exile because of their infidelities. They have abandoned God and so are spiritually dead. He preaches the importance of wisdom that is expressed in commandments. These are the source of life. The concluding verse says that if Israel does not observe the law, God will forsake them in favor of another.

In the response God is praised for His law.

The concluding prayer asks God to increase His people in the Church, by continuing to call all men to salvation, and preserve in grace those already called.

7th reading: Ezechiel 36: 16-17a, 18-28

This final Old Testament reading is taken from the second half of the 36th chapter of Ezechiel. It speaks to us of a new creation—a new heart and a new spirit, which are brought about

by God's cleansing action. It is the theme of new life which is most appropriate in our preparation for renewing our Baptismal promises. Baptism is our means to new life in God. This is the transferred meaning that we give to the reading in our christian context.

The last verses of the text are some of the most comforting in the Old Testament, and have obvious eschatological meaning: "I WILL SPRINKLE CLEAN WATER UPON YOU TO CLEANSE YOU." (a most obvious reference to Baptism) "I WILL GIVE YOU A NEW HEART, AND PLACE A NEW SPIRIT WITHIN YOU . . . I WILL PUT MY SPIRIT WITHIN YOU." (a reference to grace. And the concluding comforting promise: "YOU SHALL BE MY PEOPLE AND I WILL BE YOUR GOD."

The responsorial psalm (ps. 42) is the prayer of the man who seeks after God. An alternate responsorial (ps. 51) is an act of contrition.

The concluding prayer asks that all the blessings referred to in the readings be granted by God—to lift up fallen man and bring him to holiness. Two additional prayers are offered as alternatives. The first of these asks for an understanding of God's love and goodness, and the second is especially for those about to be baptized, and it asks that God will send His Spirit on them.

Readings for the vigil Mass

1st reading: Romans 6: 3-11

This reading takes us to the very heart of Christianity. The death and resurrection of Christ are his passover to the Father. They are also the passover of Christians, the new Exodus of salvation.

Baptism is the key to this. By it we die to the weakness of human nature, but in this very dying a new power is given—the power of the risen Christ which enables us to triumph over sin and eternal death.

This is the paschal mystery which is operative in the Christian life: death to sin and life to grace. In us the power of Christ's resurrection is constantly at work.

Our response is the joyful singing of the Easter Alleluia and an expression of thanks.

Gospel: Cycle A: Matthew 28: 1-10

Matthew's text contains the glad announcement that Christ is risen, and is to be joined once more with his followers. (He calls them brothers).

In the passages from the gospels that we will read throughout the next week there will seem to be conflicting reports. The apostolic Church made no effort to harmonize these divergent accounts, and this is in itself very significant. Unlike the Passion Narratives, the resurrection narrative was not fixed. What this means is that faith in the resurrection did not depend on the fact of everyone having the same story.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the most unique and shattering of all events related in the Scriptures, and confusion as regards the details is rather to be expected, as most commentators state. Even the mixture of some legendary details has nothing to do with our faith in the fact of the resurrection.

There is no attempt to describe the event of the resurrection, as no eye-witnesses were present. The text of St. Matthew, and the same is true of the accounts of Mark and Luke, simply calls for a response of faith, and a commitment, therefore, to all that Christ taught by his word and by the example of his life.

This is why a renewal of our Baptismal promises is most appropriate in this celebration. It is our response in faith. Together with this renewal, and as a further gesture of faith, a renewal of our religious dedication to Jesus Christ, a dedication which is rooted in our Baptismal consecration, is most fitting.

Gospel: Cycle B: Mark 16: 1-8

Like the account of Sts. Matthew and Luke, Mark gives us the women's version of the story of the resurrection. And as in the other accounts there is not an attempt to describe the event. No one witnessed it. There is just a report of it.

There is amazement. We would expect, perhaps, that there be more an atmosphere of joy and happiness. No doubt there was but the text does not express it. This comes only later after the apostles and others have seen Christ and are convinced of the fact.

See the last three paragraphs of the comment on St. Matthew's text for additional notes.

Gospel: Cycle C: Luke 24: 1-12

The appearances of the risen Christ are narrated by St. Luke as happening all on one day, concluding with the Ascension. Were it not for the other synoptic texts we would not know of any period of forty days between the major events of the Resurrection and the Ascension.

This evening's passage is just that of the announcement of the resurrection to the women who come out early on Sunday morning to the tomb. They conveyed the news to Peter as they were directed to do, and Peter's amazement at finding what they reported to be true is indicated.

There is no attempt to describe the event. It calls only for a response of faith and a commitment to all that Christ taught and did.

This is what the paschal celebration is all about, and as we are about to renew that commitment to Christ, I would like to wish all of you a most Happy and Blessed Easter, and pray that it will be for you a grace of joy and gladness which it was for Christ's first disciples. What it meant to them, let it mean to us, his apostles today.



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